**Sunset 9037**

Sunset 9036 was mostly blood-red and everyone digested that in their own way. Aunt Gilly stood out in the road and prayed, which had me grateful most of the neighbors had already gone. Mom couldn't be bothered with sunsets. She wandered out to the Bakers' farm field, holding her cell phone up to the sky in hope of a clear signal that wouldn't come. Uncle Fritz sat in a saggy old lawn chair on the porch and eyed the sun with a vague wince that could have been either anger or despair. I snapped a photo of the whole western sky. I'd taken to documenting all of humanity's remaining sunsets. Photographs of the previous twenty-nine were uploaded to an external hard drive I kept in the old guest room upstairs. Of course there was no real reason to keep them. But once everyone heard about the asteroid I tallied how many sunsets had passed since I'd been born, leap years and all. That had been the night of Sunset 8948. When this one finally slipped under the pine trees and the sky went purple, I counted, 9036.

Only one left.

Dad was more optimistic. "Red sky at night, sailor's delight," was his refrain, even though he'd never been a sailor. The town of Kettle Moraine, Wisconsin was fifty miles from the Lake and a thousand miles from the nearest ocean. "Red sky at morning, sailor take warning." Some axioms you hear so much they become true, the same way you absorb secondhand memories from family stories. That was the case here. I didn't know how true the sunset nonsense was but as an adult I've always reported it as fact to anyone who would listen.

Dad found me and Uncle Fritz on the porch and slapped his thighs in a strange, exasperated joy. He was tall and gangly, with a purposeful, toothy grin. These days it was meant to look reassuring.

"You know, Evan, I think it's a good sign. Red sky at night, sailor's delight."

"Yeah, I know, dad."

Aunt Gilly followed him up the single porch step, and most of her sunflower moomoo followed her like a cape. "I have a lovely prayer written down," she announced in that loud, nickelodeon baritone. She had red Dizzy Gillespie cheeks that looked ready to burst every time she spoke. "I want us all to hold hands." Uncle Fritz stood up in resignation, and she twisted her fingers into his. "Hold hands. Evan. Rich. Botha ya. Where's Irene?"

"She's in the field," Dad said. "Looking for a signal."

"Well. We've got four of us," Aunt Gilly said. "That's double what Jesus needs. Let us pray." She produced a folded piece of paper from her breasts and held it under the porch light. "Lord, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. We got a big comet a-comin'—"

"—asteroid," I had to correct.

"Shut up, Evan. We got a big comet a-comin', and they're some who say it's gonna blow us all to smithereens, and some say we're all of us gonna die in the aftermath when the plants get no

sunlight. Some say we're all gonna die in the blast. I say you can change its path. I say you will not let us go hungry, and you will not let the world go dark, and even if things get rough, you will protect us from the looters and the marauders and other evil men. Because I got that faith in my Lord, and if you do these things, I will forever sing your praises. In Jesus' name, amen."

"Amen," dad said.

"I'll hear you say it, Evan."

"Amen," I said.

"Evan," dad said. "Help me finish the shelter?"

We went to the garage. Dad said Aunt Gilly's prayers were working because Sunset 9036 had been a sailor's delight. I told him it didn't matter, because everyone knew the asteroid was going to hit the southern Pacific Ocean on the night of Sunset 9037, which would be in the early hours of Friday morning, our time. I meant to sound plain and casual about the facts. Credible. But he just beamed at me. "You're smart, Evan. But there's a difference between intelligence and preparedness," he said. "I prefer preparedness. Now let's go. I have a whole garage full of toilet paper to unload."

For months dad had been working on a bomb shelter just underneath the garage. When I first came home I told him that building a bomb shelter was missing the point of how big the asteroid was, but by then it was already half-filled with first aid kits, bottles of hydrogen peroxide, cans of creamed corn, spam, green beans, plastic jars of honey, toothpicks and empty jars, and insulin for Uncle Fritz.

The rest would be toilet paper. The shelter didn't have a toilet, but dad called the toilet paper the dollars of the future. "Supply and demand, Evan. Low supply makes any old mundane thing seem better, beautiful even. Everyone's loading up water bottles. No one's thinking about toilet paper. We'll be the Rockefellers of the post-apocalyptic world." I hadn't been able to get him to call it an asteroid, which is what it was. And there would be no economy, I protested, because 99% of the scientists said this is The Big One. Dad wouldn't hear of it. To him, the sun was just going away for a while. If the world had gone to hell—there was looting everywhere, even our town drug store when the owner washed his hands of it and told his employees he was going to spend his last days in the Virgin Islands—the facts didn't register with dad. I told him as much.

"Evan," he said, wagging his finger in the air, "I went into town yesterday and had a quarter pounder with cheese and a small fry. You think I could get a quarter pounder with cheese and a small fry just a few days from the end of the world?"

"Yes."

"You think I'm crazy, but all the neighbors have been asking about my shelter and my well. They don't think I'm so crazy."

It was hopeless, to be sure. But it didn't hurt anyone, either, least of all dad, so after my routine complaints I loaded the toilet paper all the same.

“Excuse me?” A tall man with red hair combed over a prematurely high forehead poked around the side. Todd Eames had been one of those easy smilers you know in high school who seemed destined for great things because he had friends in every class. I was one of them. It had been young Todd Eames who took pity on me the very first day of freshman orientation and introduced me to everyone as his “friend,” though at that time he really only knew me from living down the street. I made most of my high school friends in that class, and once I even thanked him for the kindness. That confused him. Generosity like that was so routine for Todd Eames he didn’t even remember doing it.

“Todd Eames!” my dad said by way of greeting. I gave my casual hey.

“Hey,” Eames said. “My dad said you guys have a well?”

“Sure do,” dad said. Eames came inside, towing a used old milk jug in each hand.

“Could we—could I?” Eames said, holding up the jugs.

“Yeah, you’re welcome to it,” dad said. “You can come back in a few days’ time and fill up again when you need to.” Eames gave a half-crooked smile and sighed through his nostrils, relieved of the shame of asking. “Oh,” dad said, “and tell your dad I said hi.”

Eames stopped. “My dad—” That whispered voice cracked, and instead of finishing the sentence, he walked out the back way.

“Poor kid,” dad said. “Too ashamed to do the asking. You think his dad sent him over?”

“Could be. You’re not worried about them drinking all our water?”

“Good seeds like the Eameses? I know his dad. They’ll take what they need, no more.”

“They’re going to need more than two jugs.”

“I know. Can you believe it, though? The bank president is so desperate for water he sends his son to—off all people—the patent attorney. Strange times ahead.”

No times ahead, I thought, but all I said was, “yep.”

The Internet failed a week prior, and only two kinds of television channels remained: empty off-the-air signals and live news broadcasts with “Breaking!” scrolls on the bottom. The ones still on the air said the asteroid might slip through a narrow band of space and miss us, though it was mostly the talking head televangelists who claimed that. Everyone else said the idea had no credibility at all, that any such “window” had long since come and gone. The Aunt Gillys of the world dismissed those people as pessimists and went on hoping.

Mom marched in the front door, having found the signal she was looking for. “Maura, it’s your mother. We want to talk to you before tomorrow night. The phone companies are going to be down and there will be no way to reach you. Call me back when you get this.”

“You already left messages,” I said.

“At least five,” she admitted. “But I don’t know if they’re getting through.” She didn’t look like she’d been eating, but that was old news. She’d always been thin and sinewy, with hard dyed black hair tied down in a ponytail. The hard wrinkles between her eyes were the deepest and blackest I’d ever seen.

Aunt Gilly came through the front door. “You get a holda Maura?”

“No,” mom said. “When I went out on the Bakers’ field, I got through to her voicemail, and that’s all. No rings, just straight to voicemail. Still. The only reception I got all night. Evan, your sister doesn’t love us anymore.”

Maura did, to be sure, but she’d gone to spend Sunset 9037 with her husband’s family in Minneapolis. Ever since I came home, mom had been on the phone half the time, complaining that missing a Thanksgiving every other year had been a tolerable compromise, but missing the final sunset altogether broke the fifth commandment. Skype had been enough for a while, until the Internet went. Then it was all phone calls. Finally Maura couldn’t bear say I love you and goodbye anymore and probably threw away her phone entirely. That was logical. It didn’t make sense owning a phone anymore. But all I said was, “she does. She just can’t be in two places at once.”

“She’s with her husband’s family,” she said. “She should have chosen her real family.”

“Maura has two kids, mom. She’s with her real family.”

“But you’re here, Evan.”

“Well, I don’t have a wife. Or kids.”

Aunt Gilly pounced on that. “That reminds me, Evan. I met the cutest little brown-haired woman at the comet prayer group and I told her all about my handsome, single nephew. Her name is Sara Kleidenheffer. Or Klopfensteiger, some such. One of those long Germanic names. Should I ask for her number?”

“I don’t have a phone anymore.” Neither would Sara Kleinespeicher.

“What? Why don’t you have a phone?”

“Evan believes those scientists,” mom said. “The comet’s going to kill us all, don’t you know?”

“Poo,” Aunt Gilly said. “We still have electrical power. For Heaven’s sake, some of the TV stations are still on. Would the TV stations still be on if the comet was going to kill us all?”

“Yes. Dad got a quarter pounder in town. It doesn’t mean you’ll be able to get one tomorrow.”

“What’s that one-and-a-thousand chance window they keep talking about, Evan? Just you watch. The thing’ll go right where it needs to go. One-and-a-thousand is all God needs to send that comet away.”

“Asteroid.”

“Oh, poo to your science words,” Aunt Gilly said. “Evan, you don’t pray enough.”

“He’s never been like that Eames boy,” mom said.

“Todd Eames,” Aunt Gilly remembered. “I always liked him. So courteous. Well-bred. You know once he helped me with the groceries, without me even asking? Didn’t even know who I was. He’d take Sarah Klosenpepper’s number. Why can’t you be more like Todd Eames, Evan?”

“It doesn’t matter now,” I told Aunt Gilly.

“That’s an excuse,” Aunt Gilly said, to mom. “Evan was the same way before anyone knew anything about some silly-ass space comet.”

“Don’t talk about me in the third person,” I said. “I’m right here.”

“More than I can say for your sister,” mom said. “You know what Maura’s doing to my heart? Evan, look at this. Here’s what she’s doing.” She had a golf-ball sized avocado in an outstretched hand but when she squeezed it, it didn’t burst. “Oh, cheese-and-crackers!” she shouted, without irony. “This one is all pit.” Mom had a cache of paltry home-grown avocadoes she meant to put into brownies somehow. The last thing she’d seen online before the Internet went down was a recipe that said avocadoes were nature’s butter.

Uncle Fritz came back indoors, though no one paid him any mind until he reached for the cookie jar above the fridge and Aunt Gilly slapped his hand. “Check your sugar first,” she said, so instead Fritz walked into the living room Lay-Z-Boy, wrapped a frilly plaid blanket around his waist, and settled into a deep, pulpy sleep.

Dad came in and picked some of mom’s avocados out from their brown wooden bowl. “These are perfect for the shelter,” he said. “We’ll grow them in jars, just like you’ve been doing. I’ve got canned tomatoes. A drum of garlic salt. Eternal guacamole. How do you translate that? Guamoles et aeternam. Where’s Evan? He would laugh at that. Evan!”

“Right here.” I raised my hand, sure no one was looking.

“Those are for brownies tomorrow,” Mom said. “Put those back.”

“Brownies? You don’t make brownies from avocadoes.”

“I’m going to try. Put them back.” He did, bottom lip extended. “Don’t pout. You know that Mr. Eames, down at the bank, I’ll bet he never pouts to his wife.”

It was much the same that night, dad listing his reasons for optimism (now, he said, he had a “deep gut feeling” about the asteroid skipping off the atmosphere), mom yelling about Maura, Gilly slapping Uncle Fritz away from the skillet of beef and noodles. His cholesterol. I saw some

more reports of rioting on the news and asked dad if we should open up his gun locker and test out the old hunting rifles. “Evan,” he laughed, “enough with the riot talk. I have a bat. We won’t need any guns.”

Gilly laughed too. “I prayed about the marauders, Evan. We’ll be okay.”

Before bed I uploaded the photograph of Sunset 9036 onto the external hard drive and wondered how long the things really last without human beings to maintain them. Ten years? A hundred? If they lasted a thousand and some alien civilization came upon the welted Earth and found them, would they know how to use it? I laughed at the thought with wet eyes. Pictures of sunsets were a silly thing to worry about. It didn’t matter anymore. None of it did.

When I woke up, I’d missed sunrise 9037, and dad was shaking me.

“Evan,” he whispered. “Evan. I hear noises at the Mueller place.” The Muellers were the next door neighbors who’d gone to spend sunset 9037 in St. Simon’s. They’d left a furnished house, a full pantry, even a refrigerator (running, as long as the power companies were), but dad had asked and received permission to scour it all clean. Now it was just an empty fossil of western civilization. “I’m going to investigate.”

“Take a gun with you,” I said.

“Nonsense. I won’t need the gun. Where’s your baseball bat? I’ll take that.”

“It could be looters with guns.”

“Pish-posh. Looters with guns. I’m not going to go hunt for people like they were a herd of deer. If they’re looters, they won’t find anything in there, anyhow.”

“That’s what makes us a target. All the stuff in your shelter.”

“Pish-posh,” he repeated. But I must have scared him, because he went out through the deck in the back so he could sneak in the Mueller place through the woods. Mom and Aunt Gilly were already wearing robes, watching dad through the window, sipping what might have been the last of the coffee. The TV in the kitchen was on, muted, but at least we still had power.

“He should have brought the gun,” I said.

Most people don’t shrug verbally, but Aunt Gilly always did, with a sound that was half sigh and half the word “well.” She gave it now. “Well. He’ll be just fine.”

“How do you know?”

“All your dad’s going to find in that Mueller house is your Uncle Fritz. He’s been shuffling about in that house every morning since we got here.”

“What’s he doing?”

“Darned if I know, Evan. The poor man’s succumbed to depression, no matter how much Jesus I give him. He’s been like this for months, ever since he heard about this whole space comet. He quit his job that same day, do you know that? I told him that was rash, but he’d already done it.”

“Don’t you think we should say something?”

“Oh, sure. I tell him all the time,” Aunt Gilly said. “I pray. The answers are God’s to give, though. Your uncle will get his soul back, don’t you worry. Once the comet passes.”

“Asteroid,” I had to correct again. It was true. They couldn’t see anything that was happening, but I’d at least get them to name it right.

That was when Dad came out on the Muellers’ deck, waving at us. Uncle Fritz followed with that slovenly, defeated posture of his.

“I told you I wouldn’t need a gun,” dad said after he slid open the deck door. His voice equal parts victory and relief. “It’s just your Uncle Fritz.”

Fritz explained that he had been using the Muellers’ hot tub every morning. Only this morning he couldn’t get it to work. “A hot tub?” Aunt Gilly asked. “That’s why you’ve been worryin’ us with all your strange behavior?” Fritz nodded and said, yes, and he would have invited Aunt Gilly if she had ever liked hot tubs. “I don’t have the body for hot tubs,” Aunt Gilly admitted. “Water displacement, don’t you know.”

After breakfast I took out the newest rifle from dad’s gun locker and all the ammunition I could. There was a pistol there too, the old cheap one dad bought me when I passed hunter’s safety at eighteen. The shelter was already full, so I had to wipe away half a dozen first aid kits to pack them against the wall. I left the bullets right next to them. For convenience.

The power was still on at dinnertime, just ahead of Sunset 9037, so mom cooked up a beef tenderloin dad had bought. He had frozen the rest of them, without regard to where the power for the freezer would come from, but at least some of them would get eaten. After that, Mom brought in a pan with a thin pale crust of what might have been brownies, though she didn’t announce them. When Uncle Fritz reached for it first, Aunt Gilly snapped.

“All that sugar’s going to give you a heart attack, Fritz. Eat this delicious salad. The dressing is fat-free and sugar-free.”

Uncle Fritz frowned, complied.

Mom checked her phone for messages and sat down. “Nothing, again. Your sister won’t even bother to call us tonight, Evan.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“I want you to explain why your sister loves us less than you do. Did we treat you better? Did we love you more because you’re the baby?”

“She loves you. She told you that a thousand times. She said it on Skype, then on the phone. She and her husband had to be with one family, they had to be together. There was nothing to be done.”

“Well, there are ways to experience it all together. Her phone worked the last time I spoke to her, you know.”

“She couldn’t bear it anymore. All the goodbyes and explanations.”

“You know who can’t bear it, Evan? A mother can’t bear it. That’s my child!”

“Yeah,” I said. My face was hot. “And she’s just as dead as the rest of us. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“If you think this is our last dinner, then you should be even madder than I am.”

“It doesn’t matter if I’m mad or not. None of this does. We’re lucky if we’re not dead this time tomorrow.”

“Don’t you say that! Don’t you say family doesn’t matter at a time like this! I made brownies!”

“You don’t make brownies from avocadoes!”

“You can, and they’re going to be delicious!”

“Now let’s both of you just calm down,” Aunt Gilly said. “Say, Rich, wasn’t there going to be news all about that window, that one-in-a-thousand chance?”

“Sure,” dad said, pouncing on the notion. “That should be any minute.”

Breaking, the TV scroll said. Asteroid misses window.

No one said a word.

Something crashed inside of the Mueller’s house. I stood up, put my ear to the open window. There were sounds like glass shattering, damp pounding like entire book cases and entertainment centers slamming to carpeted floors.

“It’s probably just your Uncle Fritz again…” Aunt Gilly said. Uncle Fritz tapped her on the shoulder as if to say I’m right here. “Oh,” she whispered.

“Let’s not panic,” dad said. “Evan and I will go and check out the Mueller place—everyone else hide.”

“Where?” Aunt Gilly asked.

“Outside,” I suggested. “Behind trees? All the valuable stuff is in here.”

“Okay,” dad said. “Gilly, you hide behind the trees near the Bakers’ field. Irene, you hide behind the mound. Fritz, you watch us in that house, and if we need help, you charge in. Evan.” Dad coughed to clear his throat. “Maybe it’s time you go get that gun.”

By the time dad and I searched the Mueller place, no one was there. But they certainly had been. The bookcases in the library had all been upended so you had to walk over books, and all of the kitchen cabinets were left opened. They had even upended the water cooler and left the empty jug on the floor. I led with the pistol around every corner, imagining screaming looters that never showed.

“They’re gone,” dad said when we’d reached the back porch.

“They’ve moved on,” I said. “Maybe to our house.”

“You think?”

I waved across yards to our dining room, where Uncle Fritz was staring behind the window like some half-obscured phantom. He gave a gentle wave back.

“We should check the property, at least.”

“Okay, I’ll check the garage and front yard,” dad said. “You check the backyard and the well. Is that thing loaded?”

My heart came up in my throat. “Hell yeah, it’s loaded.”

“You be careful, then.”

“You too.”

The back “yard” was really half a lawn, a mound strewn with wildflowers and tall reedy grass, a thin elm forest that went a few acres back. In the forest was an old fire pit that we hadn’t used in years, and the well.

There, a man held a knife to mom’s neck.

He held a finger to his lips to shh me, but he didn’t need to. I had already frozen. “The gun,” he whispered, and I set it slowly to the ground. “And show me your hands, and your mom won’t get hurt.”

“Evan!” she shouted.

He reeled, and squeezed his elbow tight around her neck. “Shut up, you old bitch. You fight back again, I’ll cut your fucking throat.” A sigh went through his nostrils, and his eyes filled with apology. “It’ll be over soon.”

“But why—”

“You guys have a well. You have a shelter, all stocked, right? The drug store was already empty by the time we…” He trailed off into mumbling, but the tight desperate energy around his eyes finished the sentence well enough.

“What do you want? We can’t give you a well.”

“I don’t—I don’t—” He screamed. “I don’t know. I’ll need water! My dad, his girlfriend, they went up north—”

He wailed, and fell to the ground.

Dad had the bat. He hit him again, so hard we all heard the leg crack. Mom ran to me in tears, dad shouted to grab the knife, and somehow Todd Eames found his way to one leg and hopped off, and dad jogged after him, holding the bat over his head like a lunatic, all frantic rage. Aunt Gilly and Uncle Fritz had come outside when they heard the screams, and Gilly took mom in her arms.

“The boy left a trail of blood,” Gilly said, to no one specific. “Did you get a look at him, Evan? Who was it?”

Dad’s war cries were distant howls by then. They were moving fast. Eames must have been skipping quickly on one leg to outrun dad, or maybe dad let him go and only meant to scare him away. It must have worked. I’d never heard dad howl like that.

“It was Todd Eames,” I said.

Aunt Gilly paled. “Todd Eames? From down the street?”

“Todd Eames from down the street.”

“Oh.”

Mom sobbed quietly into Gilly’s big elbows. Dad had stopped shouting, so there was only the white noise of crickets and katydids. The evening had a strange windless silence besides that, not even the familiar hum of leaves and air. Uncle Fritz leaned his arm around Gilly and patted mom on the top of her head while Gilly whispered shh, shh. Eventually Dad returned, red-faced and huffing, and for once he wore no smile.

“Is he gone?” Gilly asked.

“He’s gone,” dad said. “But I stopped at McKinley. There was a truck—in the back, people with guns. Rifles. I didn’t want them to see me. I think they drove straight west, though.” Dad picked up the gun where I’d left it and inspected it was if it was something completely new he had never once considered. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s eat that dinner your mom made us.”

No one enjoyed it, not judging from the silence that prevailed at the table. At one point Aunt Gilly whispered to herself saying Todd Eames, I couldn't believe Todd Eames… Eventually, dad had enough of the silence.

"Okay," he said. "If no one wants to say anything, I'll turn on the TV." He pressed the remote and the TV flicked on. Then he snorted, ready to laugh that the power was still on, but all of the stations had gone to static, even the 24-hour news stations that had uniformly promised to document the apocalypse live.

Gilly said, "oh."

"'Oh,' nothing. Time to live."

The high, quivering voice belonged to Fritz. He leaned over the table, grabbed the big butcher knife, and carved himself out a brownie. It was a huge corner piece, and he chomped into it without a plate.

"Fritz…" Gilly said. "…check your sugar?"

"I could give two shits about my blood sugar right now, Gilly. If I die, I'm going out fat and happy."

"Well—fat, anyway," Gilly said.

Mom burst into laughter over that. So did I. We all took some for ourselves, leaving half the pan, until Fritz cut that into quarters and served them out to fill the plates. "Come on," he said. "If Evan and all the scientists are right we're not going to be able to eat the leftovers."

When the laughter died down and we were talking in the living room, the lights went out and the soft blowing of the furnace downstairs fell silent. My ears rang a little. I never knew how comforting the sound of hot air had been all that time.

"Power's out?" I asked.

"Power's out," dad said. "That'll be the last of it."

Gilly tugged on my sleeve. "Evan," she whispered. "This asteroid of yours—it's really going to kill us, isn't it?"

"Yeah, Aunt Gilly. Maybe tomorrow, maybe not. They don't know how quickly. But quickly."

She nodded softly but perked up straight, as though the solid weight of all her pending prayers had turned to mist. "Well. I suppose I've been looking sideways at death all this time. Don't you ever listen to your old frightened Aunt, Evan. We all have to die, right? If it's not an asteroid, it's a car accident, or slipping in the shower, or cancer, maybe. Even old age, for those who don't give up. But even then it eventually comes, doesn't it?"

"It does."

"Well. No point bargaining with God, then."

“Why are we inside?” Fritz said. “It’s about to be the last sunset, and I wanna enjoy it. Evan, you wanna watch?”

“Let’s all watch,” dad said.

There was still some daylight to burn, though, so Gilly gathered us all in a little group in the front yard and prayed.

“Lord, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. That’s a good prayer, Lord, and I’m sorry it’s not the prayer I’ve been making these past weeks. Now I know, Lord, that your people have been despicable these past eons ever since—well, the Flood, ever since. And now that your Judgment has come we’re just gettin’ worse. Men—good, honest men—have become what they once were not. Thieves, looters, and maybe worse. We know your asteroid is going to hit—“

“’Asteroid’!” I said. “Well done!”

“Shut up, Evan. Anyhow, we know the asteroid’s going to hit, and there’s nothin’ we can do to change that. But even without that comet we’re all sort of doomed to mortality in our own way, so now I see that praying to you to change the fact about us dyin’ was—well, that was in vain. So I don’t ask you to change the comet’s path anymore. I want you to change our path. Give us the discipline to ration our food even when we’re hungry. Give us light in our hearts so that when your sun goes out, we still have enough. Finally, give us the wisdom to see the bad men from the good. And when that wisdom fails, give us ice cold blood in our veins and sound aim. Because we have food to protect, and a fat lady’s gotta eat. And if we die tonight, let it be with laughter on our lips, because all of the prayers I’ve got, well, they’ve all been said. In Jesus’ name.”

“Amen,” we all said, and most of us were relieved, except mom was crying.

“Oh. Maura, my baby,” she said, waddling over to me. “Does she know, Evan? Does she know I love her?” She squeezed me as tight as her scrawny limbs would allow. I hugged back extra hard, for Maura.

That was the last of it; the rest of the evening was watching Sunset 9037 in uncontested silence. It was gorgeous. Supply and demand, dad had always said. And it was gentle on the eyes, the sun in its Tennessee orange. The clouds were thin, long arrows at the horizon, pink and red, and willowy like the impossible threads of giant feathers. Dad pointed at a hawk scouring the northwestern sky, its wings still and the air carrying it aloft, until it dove behind the pine trees. That comforted me some. As long as predators still had prey, the strange violent order of the world had preserved. Dad went on about the migratory patterns of hawks for a while, and I thought about uploading a picture to the hard drive. I thought better of it. I had enough pictures. Soon, no one spoke. Maybe we hoped the silence would slow the moment. It didn’t. The clouds thinned after the last cap of the sun slid under the horizon, and just after we spotted the first star of the night, Dad asked me with a wink what color the sky had been all evening, and though it had been purple and red and orange and gold all I said was, red.

THE END