

India Carpenter

Prose, fiction

Damned

It smells different than the burning of fire in the fireplace—cozy, tinting the air with pine, a calming, almost soothing crackle. This is the smell of destruction, of all life burning. Instead of the earthy and relaxing scent billowing from the flaming logs, this is the hair-singing, lung suffocating inhalation of black smoke that stains lungs. The unmistakable stench of burning hair wafts into my lungs from the animals cornered or trapped under the logs that have crashed around them during their escape attempt. I can almost hear the animal’s heartbeats, their cries, but in reality, I can only smell them burning.

It’s mid-autumn, so almost everything is dry and dying in preparation for winter. The trees have dropped their leaves and become barren shells, leaving their crispy counterparts on the ground, easily flammable. The fire probably started from the storm last night, a lightning strike catching the leaves on fire and spreading from there. I’m mesmerized by the light, the bright flames shooting up towards the early morning sky, coloring it with a hazy orange color. I sit, the wing of my cloak draped over my nose and mouth to try and keep the smoke out. I cough anyways, and Apollo stomps impatiently below me, and coughs too. I turn his head and begin to lead him away. It’s not good for either of us, to stay and watch the forest burn.

Apollo’s coat is almost a bright orange color, blending him in with the colors of autumn and making him look like he belongs in one of those seasonal horse calendars. He’s a chestnut gelding though, just a bright one. As we start away from the fire, I drop the cloak from my face, letting it fall back to my side and drape across Apollo’s hindquarters. I can still hear the fire trembling, making the wood, pop, and sizzle around us. Apollo snorts, ridding his nose of the ash and smoke, as we continue walking. The further from the fire we get, the crisper autumn weather returns us to our reality, instead of being fanned with the heat of the flames.

I carry my camping backpack on my back, repurposed from previous recreational and fun uses to a new, survival and adventurous use. A keychain I carved in middle school hangs off the side engraved with my name, Keda. I made it one year out of frustration after yet another family trip where I couldn't find one of the souvenirs with my name on it. Apollo is saddled with my father's old saddle, a more comfortable, long term saddle for the both of us. Behind me is a giant roll of the rest of our stuff--a compact tent, two pots rolled up inside, my sleeping bag, and some extra, miscellaneous food that doesn't fit into the backpack, all tied down with leather straps. My family's old portable radio is placed just under the zipper of the pack—protected from the rain, but easily accessible. Two water bottles are strapped to the side of the saddle, the water rolling and sloshing about with each step Apollo takes.

The ridge we're descending looks down onto the rural area, a couple dozen houses in view total. Some roads twist between the houses, a rural community gathered in the valley. I gently ask Apollo to stop, and I reach into my side pocket for binoculars. I raided the house before I left, looking for anything I could take with me. The valley looks barren. No lights on, nobody getting ready for school. No alarm clocks going off, or dogs being let out into the yard. Not even the farmers who get up at the first sign of light, mounting their steeds to start herding cattle, could be found. I see nobody but a few parked cars next to houses, looking almost normal. A bright blue pickup sat abandoned in the middle of the road, and I can't help but wonder what happened for them to stop right there.

I reach down and stroke Apollo's shoulder, his winter coat growing the further into autumn we get. I urge him forward, and we start our descent off the ridge, leaving the fire behind us.

~ ~ ~

It only started a couple of months ago, maybe eleven weeks at most, but the days are starting to blur together no matter how hard I try to keep track. I wrote updates in my journal the first few weeks, but they started to get repetitive. My journal entries grew shorter and shorter until I finally ran out of the motivation to write about all the deaths. I kept my journal by my bedside anyways, pen on top in case I changed my mind.

The outbreak started in the northeast, carried over into New York City from somewhere in Europe. People always thought they just had the flu at first, feverish, coughing, sometimes puking, but then it spread around the city, and everybody started dying. People started to flee, I heard one news reporter say it took some people two days of sitting in traffic just to make it out of the area. But even if they made it out alive, they took it with them. They carried the damned thing whether they knew it or not and started spreading it to other people. The country went into a state of emergency in less than a week, quarantining from Maine down to Maryland and all the way out to Ohio, hoping that would stop the spreading. Even if we lost everyone in the quarantine zone, the rest of the country would survive.

Meanwhile, Europe was more equipped to handle the situation. Apparently, the person who infected the U.S. flew in from the UK, so the islands were isolated and quarantined immediately. As soon as the EU heard, each country was quarantined into their own border. Only a handful of countries were affected, but those lost most of their populations too. We heard radio updates about Europe for the first two weeks or so, but then the panic was just about our country and how to keep everyone from dying a painful, blistering death.

We live around two thousand miles from the quarantined area. We didn't think it'd ever come this far. My parents and I lived around a twenty-minute drive from the town. Town was nothing big, only around 10,000 people in our area, which isn't a lot considering how spread out

everything is. Our house was in a flat field, with a sea of golden grass surrounding us, looking like waves as the wind ripples through them. I used to sit out on the back-porch swing and watch the waves move around our barn. Even though we were landlocked, it was a little haven

Some people must have carried the sickness out of the east before the quarantine was put into effect, because suddenly it appeared in Florida, Texas, and California. It had the lower forty-eight encompassed at the borders. Canada and Mexico went into lockdown. Nobody from the States could leave, and nobody entered. Who would even want to enter when such a thing was happening? People started to panic, trying to get away from the areas of disease as quickly as they could. Gas stations ran out of fuel and “Sold out” signs started popping up everywhere. I didn’t know where people were trying to go, if we couldn’t get in or out, the only thing I could imagine was people driving into the sea. How else would you escape it? Maybe people were trying to get to their loved ones one last time.

My parents and I decided it was best to stay where we were. Isolated in our modestly populated state, out in our field with our neighbors two acres away. School was cancelled—everybody was leaving or panicking, so what was the use in trying to keep kids at desks when people were out there dying? People were always dying, but it had finally come to our own backyard. Not even our backyard, no, it was in our living room.

Although we tried to keep acting like life was normal, it wasn’t. My parents carried worried looks on their faces, meeting in the corner of the kitchen to whisper in hushed tones and shoot anxious glances outside towards the mountains and the town, then back at me, sitting on the couch trying to pretend like everything was okay. People started leaving our town too, including shop owners; as they left, they kept their stores unlocked as a courtesy, a last farewell to the rest of us staying behind. I went with my father into town one day to gather as much food

as we could. We mostly tried to grab stuff that would last—canned food, cereal, things that didn't need to be refrigerated or frozen. We grabbed other things like bread, fruits, and veggies too, but those would spoil first, so we ate them quickly. While we were in town we also ran to the hardware store, stocking up on durable flashlights, expanses of rope, batteries, knives, tarps, and whatever could potentially come in handy.

A week or two passed, and some doctors were trying to find a cure as quickly as they could, but nobody had time to properly study the virus, the disease, the bacteria, the *who-knew-what*. That, and everyone had a fear of approaching anyone, for fear of contamination. As more people across the states started to die, we'd get fewer updates. TV reporters started leaving or dying, so the channels shut down. But then the people running the power companies started to die too, or at least not care about their job anymore. So, we lost most power and electricity.

We ate all the food in the fridge over the next couple days and pulled the radio out of the garage to try to get updates. It's the same radio I have in my pack now. It's an old, rusty red thing with the paint chipped all over the sides. You pull a metal antenna out of the top as long as it can go and adjust the channels and volume with little plastic knobs on the front. For the next week, it sat on the kitchen counter, and every few hours one of us would go up to it, check the batteries, and try to search for a signal. The more days passed, the less we heard, and the more the static and white noise consumed the house.

I think it was four and a half weeks in when my Mom got sick. I heard her stumble into the hallway in the middle of the night, bumping into the walls as she walked. She barely made it to the bathroom and she collapsed to her knees, throwing up into the toilet. I could hear her gags, the rasping of her throat, but I stayed in bed, eyes closed, hoping it was just a nightmare.

The next morning, she was on the pastel blue couch and swaddled in a blanket. Dad was bringing her water—she was shivering but sweating profusely. It made her blonde locks cling to her forehead and her cheeks. Her face was pallid, and you could see her losing color as the veins showed through her skin more. Her lips were chapped. Dad begged me to stay upstairs, so I watched everything from the staircase. She wasn't keeping anything down, not even water. She was throwing up bile into a bucket next to the couch, burning her throat and crying painful, desperate tears with each new bout of gut wrenching.

In the middle of the night I woke up to her screaming. Dad stayed up the entire night with her. I watched as he went to get her more water, trying to keep her hydrated. He rested his hands on the cool granite countertop and hung his head low, eventually lowering it all the way to the counter. I heard his soft sobs, the small droplets that splattered onto the floor. I wanted to go down and tell him we'd be okay, hug him, but I knew he'd only get mad that I was putting myself at risk. I didn't think I was any less at risk down there than I was upstairs.

In the morning, I saw why Mom was screaming. Her skin had started to blister. Her face was covered in swollen red spots, clear fluid under some but pus under others. They'd grow until they popped, just like the ones you get on your heel from wearing new shoes. Whenever a new one burst, the dead skin hung limply down. Sometimes the clear liquid would flow down her face, and Dad would wipe it off with a hand towel. It almost looked as though her skin was boiling, erupting these white bubbles all over her body, surrounded by the angry red irritation swelling up her flesh. She was still covered with a blanket, but she wasn't throwing up anymore. I just saw the welts on all of her exposed skin. Her lips were cracked and bleeding. She couldn't hold a glass of water for herself because her hands shook too much, and moving her blistered arms hurt. I couldn't bear to look after a while, so I retreated to my room, numb with confusion

and shock, as I heard my mother's screams, my father trying to heal her, and my helplessness clouded every thought.

That night my Dad called me downstairs. My Mom's breathing was shallow, labored. Her eyes were closed, most of the blisters were popped but a few remained. This wasn't my mom, not the mother I knew. My mother was a beautiful blonde, with hazel eyes and glasses. She was a teacher, she loved kids and being outside. She was the one who always reminded me to pack extra socks, and to put sunscreen on my face even in the winter, because the sun would reflect off the massive piles of snow we got. But now her face is the one blistered, deformed into something I don't recognize. She could hardly manage to croak a sound out of her mouth, let alone smile or move at all. Her glasses were on the table next to her, and she'd never put them on again.

"Keda, you should say goodbye..." my Dad choked back sobs. I lifted my mother's limp hand off the blanket, careful to avoid the open wounds. Her rings were still on her finger, clear diamonds in a simple band. I ran my fingers over it like I used to whenever I would lie in bed with her, too scared to sleep, or as I had my head in her lap as we would watch movies. Her nails were short but strong, she was always working with her hands too much to ever grow them out. It hurt me to look at her face. I wanted to hug her, but I knew it would hurt her more, and I didn't want to cause her any more pain, or potentially wake her from sleep, her release from hell.

That was the first time during the whole panic that I really cried. Everything was hitting me all at once. I'd stayed so numb to everything for so long. Even when my friends fled, we talked until the cell towers went down, but then I just hoped for the best. Hoped I'd see them again. But with my Mom, I gently wrapped her arm around my shoulders, and rested my head on



her chest. I heard her breaths get shallower, and her heartbeat weaken as she faded away. I kissed the top of her head, where no blisters grew beneath her hair, before she took her last breath.

That's when I started to cry. My tears fell into her hair, and I hugged her head and kissed her one last time. I whispered into her ear,

“I love you, Mom, I love you. Thank you for everything, and I'm so sorry. I love you, Mama,” and sobbed into her shoulder until I couldn't hear her heartbeat anymore.

My Dad pulled me up and swept me into his arms. His beard had grown out since Mom got sick, he hadn't been taking care of himself. I was only up to his shoulders, but I liked that. His arms wrapped around me and I could smell the scent of fire on his flannel, from all our times outside at night. He always wore that shirt when we had the fire pit going, so it always smelled like those perfect nights, like burnt pine and sage.

As my sobs began to fade, he helped me up and walked me to my room. He hadn't helped me to bed or tucked me in for the night in years. I got into bed with in my day clothes and pulled the comforter up to my neck, wrapping my arms around it and curling to one side. My dad leaned down and gave me a hug and kissed the top of my head. He switched the light off on his way out. A couple moments later, I heard him talking to Mom. I couldn't help but cry.

~ ~ ~

Apollo's hooves clack against the dark pavement. We walk in the middle of the right lane, just as though we were a car, as if everything was totally normal. I button my cloak to my neck and tug it closer around my chest. I pull the dark hood over my head and use one hand to pull the fabric over my face for a moment to get a break from breathing the smoky air. I got the cloak a few years ago for a Halloween costume, but I liked it so much I wore it in the fall and

winters whenever I rode, because it kept Apollo warmer too. I felt like a character out of a mystery book whenever I got on and had my hood up. A mysterious detective wandering through the streets, but now I'm the only one around and there's nobody to investigate.

I'm a couple towns away from home, and I've probably gone over a hundred miles in the past two weeks. Doors to supermarkets are left open, and some irrelevant shops look untouched—the gift store with trinkets and magnets, the butcher where all the meat is long expired, the flower shop, the restaurants. I see a boot store and an ice cream shop, ice cream long melted, standing there waiting to be opened again.

Apollo and I wander to the edge of the town where another supermarket rests on the corner, grim and haunting in its lack of customers. Some houses are down the road a bit. I swing my right leg over to Apollo's left side and dismount. I walk in front of him and kiss his nose. I love the way he smells, familiar, like home. I never understood people who didn't like the smell of horses, it always relaxes me.

I talk to Apollo as we walk throughout the day, keeping us both entertained. Sometimes as we passed by road cuts that revealed the layers of rock underneath I'd tell Apollo all about geology. I've always been fascinated with it, I had a collection of polished rocks on my windowsill, and when the sun was setting they'd cast a colorful collage onto my ceiling. I'd tell Apollo about my favorite memories from school or trips with my parents. Sometimes I just talked about how crazy this whole thing was, and I'd cry because I was lonely, and I'd lost everything and everyone I knew was most likely dead. Other times I sing songs from musicals and bands that I loved just to hear the sound of my own voice.

This time as I dismount, I swing my backpack to the ground. We're off the road in a patch of browning grass. I pull the radio out and sit cross legged on the ground, my cloak sweeping behind me. Apollo watches me for a moment, takes his brown eyes and looks towards

the sun, then takes a step forward and begins to graze. I'm not sure how I'll keep him healthy when the ground is covered in snow, it's not like I could take grain or hay with me. I shake the thought, it's a problem for another time.

I run my fingers over the top of the radio, remembering when we would hear voices coming through still, updating us on numbers, concerns, and the research. I could hear the numbers go up. It started with 100,000 dead in the city within two days. Inside the quarantine ring, it grew to 2.5 million. It had just started killing people in nearby states—Colorado, Utah, Oregon, when we stopped hearing anything anymore. I pull the antenna up and out, flicking the switch to the familiar static noise I've heard every night for nearly the past two months. I begin to cycle through the channels, repeating the same mantra and waiting close to five minutes for every station I could get, which was about nine of them.

~ ~ ~

When my Dad got sick, he didn't let me stay to watch him die. I didn't understand why I didn't get sick. I sat in my dying mother's arms, breathing the same air, breathing in some of the breath she let out because I was so close to her, but I didn't get sick.

It was around a week and a half after Mom died that I heard a glass break, and my Dad call me downstairs. I slowly descended, my heart beating in my ears and my stomach making me nauseous. He was lying on the floor in the kitchen, but as I walked in he pushed himself up to lean against the cabinets that lined the floor. The trashcan was opened, and Dad was pale. I took a step back towards the stairs, my hand still on the railing,

“Dad no, no, you can't!” I cried,

“Honey, you're going to be okay.”

“No! You can’t leave me, too,” I sobbed. I rushed to his side and squeezed his neck. I felt like a kid again, I didn’t think it would come this far. We all thought the quarantine would fix this and that we’d be okay. Even though I’m a senior in high school—*was* a senior in high school—I felt like a little girl again. I didn’t want to be alone.

“Keda, sweetheart, you have to go.”

“What do you mean *go*? I’m not leaving you!”

“You shouldn’t have to stay and watch me, it’s not fair to you. There’s nothing you can do for me. Go find other people, okay? I’ll help you get ready as much as I can. You can take Apollo with you, you’re strong, Keda, you *can* do this.” He tried to soothe me, rubbing my shoulder. I was shocked. I couldn’t fathom that this was happening. But as he gave me instructions from the kitchen floor, occasionally leaning forward to heave into the trashcan, I obeyed. I grabbed our tent, my sleeping bag. Some pots. He told me where the maps of the state were—we used to backpack once or twice a year. I took my camping backpack. He told me to take the radio and to check it every day before I went to sleep.

I ran out to the barn after I had gathered everything. I groomed Apollo the best that I could. It seems like such a feeble task, looking back at it, but I wasn’t taking the brushes with me, and he deserved it. I had been running out to the barn every day through the back door while Mom was sick. It was only my parents, Apollo and I, and I wasn’t allowed downstairs for so long. I didn’t ride when she was sick. I just let him out to graze and watched his ears flick back and forth, his head lift above the grasses for a breath, to gaze around at the view we were lucky enough to have in the valley. Sometimes he’d pull the lead and I’d walk with him until he decided the grass was good enough again. The air was fresh, thin altitude air. I could fill my lungs and breathe unlike when I was in the house. But then again, this air was contaminated too.

I tacked him up in a saddle I pulled from the tack room. A dark oak color, in finely polished leather that had been protected with a green colored cloth cover. The metal of the bit clinked together as I asked Apollo for his mouth, and he let the bit settle under his tongue. For one last time, I slid open the barn doors to the outside, pushing a little harder to move past the rust. I jogged through the waist high grass, making Apollo trot alongside me. I threw the reins over the log railing on our porch and rushed inside. If Apollo moved at all, it would have just been to graze some more. I flung the door open and didn't bother shutting it. Dad was still on the floor.

“Hey honey,” he faked a meager smile, “Got Apollo all ready?” Tears sprung to my eyes and I felt my face tighten, my lips pursed trying to hold back tears. I wanted him to come with us. Go take a neighbor's horse and we could go together.

He was the one who taught me everything. Since I was in elementary school he started taking me on backpacking trips. He used to carry all my stuff for me. I was too small, the backpacks were too big, and the hike was too long for me to make it on my own. As I got older I started carrying a small backpack, and in fifth grade I graduated to a full-sized backpack. I got newer ones as I got older and stronger. Dad taught me from such a young age how to “put red in the shed” on a compass and how to read geography survey maps. How to read the contour lines and go somewhere. We'd cook on the trail; my favorite was always pita pizzas. When I got older my Mom started coming on our summer backpacks while she didn't have to worry about teaching.

“Dad, come with me,” I begged.

“Keda, you know it won't work. I'm not going to get any better, please. I'll be happiest knowing you're getting away from here and that you're alive. I know you have the skills, Keda, please,” he said through a strained voice, beginning to cry. For one last fatherly deed, one last

“little girl” moment, I asked him for his help. I knew how I should pack my bag—rain layer on top, radio on top. Water bottles easily accessible, food I’d eat soon in the middle. The camping stuff would all get rolled together and tied to the back of the saddle. Flashlights, flint and steel, extra batteries for the radio is something I wasn’t used to, but I knew it all. Still, I asked for his help anyway. I wanted to hear him talk for as long as I could, to hear his voice, capture it in a jar, and carry it in my head so that whenever I missed him the most I could open it and hear him talking to me again.

I sat next to him while I slowly packed my bag, delaying my departure. I rolled the tent, sleeping bag, and pots slowly, letting the air deflate more than it needs to. I’d have the tent with me at least. Something we shared. We had to patch Old Blue up a couple times over the years. Stakes accidentally tore holes into the fly cover, and we had a marmot chew a hole in the bottom of the tent one year, but duct tape fixed it all. I tied the coil up with some strands of rope and lean over into my father’s arms.

“I don’t want you to be alone, Dad,” I whispered.

“I’ll be with your mother soon, sweetheart. Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine, I’ll be happier knowing you’re safe,” he said before kissing the top of my head. We’d both accepted that if I was going to get sick, it would happen no matter the distance between us. I wrapped my arms around him and started to cry again. “Keda, you’re so strong. I believe in you, okay? Trust Apollo, trust yourself. Mom and I love you so much, but you have to go now. Go, love, please,” he said. He was crying again, but it was the silent cry that I’d seen him do so many times before when he didn’t want to show it. He mustered all of his remaining energy into sitting forward and wrapping me in his arms one last time, squeezing me in a boa constrictor hug. I returned the favor. He kissed my head again.

“I love you,” I choked out,

“I love you, Keda,” He released me, “Go, be safe, be strong.”

~ ~ ~

The first week, Apollo and I barely covered any ground at all. We went maybe twenty miles. I didn't know which direction to go in. I decided south west because some of the bigger cities were down there. But I sat for most of that week, knees tucked to chest, crying. I left my father to die. My mother died. I had seen a handful of people since leaving, but two were sick, some were leaving, and the other one I met was heading in a different direction. I considered joining her, going north instead, but I didn't think north was a good idea with winter coming. Sometimes a break from riding would turn into hours. I'd stare into the forest in the distance replaying everything in my head. I wondered if my friends were still alive somewhere, or if they had all died too. If they lived, would I ever see them again? Where were Apollo and I even going? Was this going to be my life forever? Sometimes I didn't think about anything at all. I just sat and stared into the distance, the sun slowly moving across the sky and my mind being numb, trying to forget everything. Apollo would nuzzle me once in a while, bringing me back to the present and encouraging me to stand up so we could move forward. I hardly ate.

By the second week it became normal to me. I felt like a roamer. I packed up camp every morning, Apollo and I both carrying everything we If I didn't pack well enough, sometimes we'd rattle while we walked. The dented metal pans clanging together in the roll, rice or lentils acting like a maraca in my backpack, the rustling of the rain jacket meshed with the sloshing of my water. We became an accidental mobile band. Every morning, whenever the sun woke me up, I'd heat up whatever I'd eaten the night before for my breakfast while Apollo snacked on bushes and grass nearby. I'd roll everything up, saddle Apollo, and we'd be on our way again. Some days

we made it nearly forty miles, while others we were crossing mountains or steep ridges and it took us longer so we'd only make it ten. There's so much different terrain, each day was different. I was no longer in the valley where I lived, surrounded by the mountains. I was in dryer, more desert places. Some areas that almost made it seem like the Midwest they were so full of taller, denser trees. Not the pines and aspens I grew up around.

Some days the silent static on the radio made me sick to my stomach, and made me consider skipping it the next day, but the more ground we covered in a day, the more hopeful I was that maybe somebody, anybody could be on the channel, so I continued to do it anyways. I always heard my Dad's voice when I switched it on. "Check the radio every night before you go to bed."

~ ~ ~

The sun is setting just as the water begins to boil on the whisper light. About an hour ago I took Apollo over and raided the supermarket for some gas to fill up my fuel bottle with, and some other variety of food. I settled on rice and beans with some sweet corn, took the boxes plus a couple extras, and returned to my little camp set up. My first week or so out here I considered sleeping in the houses, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Sure, I might be warmer, but I'd be intruding on somebody's life, and potentially their bodies, but I'd be living in a space that wasn't mine to be in, wasn't mine to see. So, Apollo and I camp out every night. Sometimes I set up Old Blue so I can sleep more comfortably, but I leave the fly cover off so I can see Apollo.

Apollo's saddle is resting on the ground, shielding the little backcountry stove from the slight breeze that keeps coming in. I pour the rice into the water and decide to cycle through the channels again. By the time I finish listening to the static on channel three, the rice is nearly done



and I add in the beans slowly while stirring. The flame makes an unnatural hissing sound from the gas pouring into the small dish. A couple feet away I can hear Apollo ripping up grass and walking around me. Just as I'm about to take the pot off the stove, I hear a voice. I whip my head around, looking at the houses around me, at Apollo, then at the radio. I stare intently and my heart begins to race. It couldn't have come from the radio, right? I was just turning the sound of the wind in the trees to voices.

“Hello? Is anybody there?” I freeze, listening intently. Then, once it sets in that someone is broadcasting, I dart for my pack and grab my maps. The voice continues. “My name is Walter Spackman. If anybody, anybody at all can hear this and is interested in meeting up... you know, want company, power in numbers whole thing, I'm currently broadcasting from close to Sweetwater. There's been a wildfire out further east of me, I can see the smoke over the mountains.” I pull my map over to me to double check my coordinates and all the towns and landmarks we've passed. I'm south of the reservation, but just past South Pass City. I'm only about thirty miles outside of Sweetwater. “There's a small station setup that I put into the office of this barn, so, uh if you're hearing this then I guess it's working. If you want to try and find me, if you're coming from the north head down state route 191 and you can follow the signs to Sweetwater. Once you get near Sweetwater, take a left. I'm not going in there, too big a population. Too many people dead. When you get to the road that has an intersection with streetlights, follow the road left until you find Lupine Lane. There's a barn down that road, you'll find it. I'll be right here. If you're comin' from the west—” I stop listening and check my map again. I'm north of Sweetwater, I could get there in a couple of days if I moved efficiently enough. He finishes giving directions from the other ways and I pay attention again. “Well, I hope somebody can hear this and... maybe I'll see someone soon. Or maybe I'm just talking to

myself out there.” He sounds lonely, a little dismayed and hopeless. I wish there was some way to let him know I’m coming.

I decide not to pack up that night, no matter how much my heart really wants to. It keeps racing and I’m jittery. I’m excited at the prospect of another human. Finally, someone else to talk to and travel with, somebody else who survived. But I’m anxious. I don’t know this Walter guy at all, I don’t know who he is, where he came from, or anything about him or his past. He could be creepy, try to kidnap me or just be crazy or weird. But, I like to think that in this situation, people would just want a friend, company, a travel partner. Companionship in general, and that anything like that would go out the window. That, or at least most of them are dead.

About twenty minutes later, I hear his voice again. I must have left the radio on in the background while I sorted through maps and ate my dinner. Apollo’s ears pricked and he raised his head from the grass for a moment.

“Hello? Is anybody there? My name is Walter Spackman.” His continues his spiel, the same stutters and dialect as it was last time. He must have managed to put himself on some sort of loop. I don’t blame him, I wouldn’t particularly want to say the same thing over and over again in a desperate panic. My mom used to laugh and tell my dad that the definition of insanity was doing the same thing over again and expecting a different result. I smile at the memory, my dad trying to fix our fence posts outside. He had refused to hire somebody else, but the horses kept on knocking it down. I return to the present, and I switch the radio off for the night.

In the morning, the dew has frosted on the dying grass and has begun to melt. The outside of Old Blue is covered with water and I have to shake it off before rolling it up. Apollo walks to me from under the tree he stayed under for the night and comes up behind me and rubs his head on my back. He nearly knocks me over, and I laugh and turn, my leg flying to the side to catch myself. I grab Apollo’s face into a hug and he snorts into my cloak. I lift his head and kiss his

nose. He watches me intently as I take care of the rest of the morning chores. Occasionally he comes up and pokes my shoulder with his nose, lets his head low to the ground to sniff my breakfast or my backpack, or uses me as a scratching post for his head.

The sun has finally peaked over the mountains and crested the trees, warming the air considerably from the cold shadows that covered our spot for the night. With the sun, the grass begins to dry. I pack up the last of my backpack, and head to tack Apollo. I take the time to clear the dirt off of him the best that I can with my hands. I pick off dirt clumps, curry him with my hand and then try to sweep the dust off his coat. I use my fingers to come through his mane and tail, and he happily stands, letting me hug his neck or kiss his nose occasionally.

I lug the saddle over from its resting spot at the base of the tree that Apollo was previously standing at and use my thigh to help me swing the saddle and pad up and onto his back. As I cinch him up and begin fastening the rolls of stuff onto the back of the saddle, I can't help but think about Walter. I picture him old and rugged, calloused hands and peppered hair. A guy who wears thick flannels all into winter and wears Carhartt clothes. An outwardly tough but inwardly soft person. I can see him sitting at the table where he set up the station, recording his voice and looking out the window to see his horse grazing in a nearby pen. Maybe Apollo would also get a friend. I panic. What if he's not there? What if he died, thought he was immune to the disease but just got it really late? As I feed the bit into Apollo's mouth and do up the straps, I run through a thousand scenarios in my head.

I lift my left foot into the stirrups and hold onto the horn, heaving myself up into the saddle. I settle in, adjusting myself, making sure the rolls are tied down, my backpack is on my bag and under my cloak, and that Apollo is all ready for the day's journey. I pat his shoulder and gather the reins in my hand, urging him forward and towards the road.

~ ~ ~

Apollo walks faithfully along the road while I clutch the map in my hands, looking at the landmarks around us. We could see Sweetwater in the distance. I was starting to shake, I was constantly scanning for the yellow streetlight. It would no doubt be out of commission, but there aren't many around here. I'm sure once you got into town there would be, but not this far out on this straight shot road.

It takes about another fifteen minutes of walking until I see it. I fall forward and hug Apollo's neck, patting his shoulders and uttering words of praise to him. I want to get there, get there now. I want to urge Apollo forward, canter—no, gallop, down the road until we get to Lupine Lane, see Walter standing there. But Apollo's worked so hard, there's too much that could flop around, and the road would hurt his hooves. I'm trusting myself. He's going to be there. He has to be. He's going to be just as I imagined him, just a kind guy looking for a friend in this desolate scenario. A friend and a travel companion, someone to lighten the load and lift each other's emotional weight.

We follow the directions that I wrote down, and Lupine Lane turns out to be a dirt road. Apollo kicks up the dust as he walks, creating a dense cloud behind us. I can see the barn, and my heart kicks. I don't see anybody, I don't see any horse, but he's got to be there. Walter didn't leave. A thought in the back of my mind keeps prodding me. What if he died? What if he got sick when the radio went out, and he's dead too? I push it away. No. Walter is going to be here, he needs to be. Without thinking, I yell out,

“Hello? Walter?” as loud as I can. There's nothing. We're approaching the main barn now; rough wooden fences making round pens and live out stalls for the horses that once lived

here. The disease didn't seem to be affecting animals, but I know my parents probably would have let them out to try and fend for themselves instead of letting them starve in pens that they couldn't escape.

I see a pile of half eaten hay in the pen that attaches to the building. My heart leaps, it's not matted or moldy from rain, it looks relatively fresh. I slide off Apollo's back and drape the reins over the hitching post outside the door. I walk inside and see racks of saddles collecting dust. The floor is unattractively made of concrete, and cobwebs decorate the ceiling. In the corner is a desk with some bookshelves above it, most of them covered in a layer of dust, not so unusual in barns, but a few of the books appear to have been cleared off. I rush over, running my fingers over the clean ones. I look at all the radio equipment on the desk, small, portable ones that I'm sure he finagled into his pack and prioritized.

The door to the connected pen is open and I awkwardly jog outside, hoping maybe his horse is hidden behind the wall and that he just went out to gather supplies in Sweetwater, but there's nothing. The pile of hay I saw is still airy and fresh, it must be from the hay loft, I saw the ladder to it in the room. I'll be able to feed Apollo with that for a while, give him some more food that way.

I head back inside the building, lagging. I feel my face get hot, flushed with blood, and my limbs feel heavy. My lungs begin to constrict, and I have to force myself to breathe. Where is he? I walk back to the table and start opening drawers. In the thing, middle drawer I find a ripped piece of yellow notepad paper.

“To Whom It May Concern:

If you came to find me, Walter, I'm sorry but I had to leave. I couldn't stay here any longer. I'm heading east in hopes of finding more people. Couldn't take my radio equipment

with me this time, but maybe you'll find me anyway. I don't know where I'll set up base next, but I've been staying for about two to three weeks typically, until I run out of supplies. I plan on taking I-80, which'll take me to Cheyenne at some point. I'm sorry if you've come too late. Best of luck to you. This barn is a nice place to rest up for a while and take real shelter, feed your horse.

May we meet in the future,

Walter Bradman”

My chest is heaving by the end of the letter. It's hard to read because my hands are shaking so much, and tears are running down my face. He was supposed to be here, he said he'd be here. I want to kick the wall, throw something, punch something. I can't believe I was stupid enough to get my hopes up for this stranger. This stranger who has blocky handwriting and who is still the only person somewhat close to me. I know I want to follow his path, take I-80 and see if I can find him. But he's right, I should rest. Who even knows how far he's gotten. Cries escape in-between my breaths and the letter crumples into one of my fists. I stagger outside to Apollo, his ears perking towards me in curiosity as he hears my distress. I collapse by his legs with the letter in my hand and my face red and swollen with tears. I let my head fall back against the barn and as my breaths come out in shudders. Apollo's head is in my lap and I lean my forehead against his. I smooth the letter out in my hands and try to reread it again. The tears fall from my face, landing on Apollo's face and sliding down into my lap. I look up and see the orange tinge of the wildfire smoke coming up and over the mountains, just like Walter said it was.