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## Godzilla versus the Smog Monster

PATRICK IS FOURTEEN, this is earth, it's dark, it's cold out, he's American, he's white, straight, not everyone has cell phones, he's sitting on the carpet of the TV room on the third floor holding the remote in both hands in his lap. He's sitting with one leg tucked under the other on the deep shag oval rug, his back against an enormous ottoman. Other elements of the modular sofa orbit him. It's a solid, stable position. On the second floor and on the other side of the house, behind a door off the hall that overlooks the living room, his parents sleep in a high walnut bed, under a moss-green comforter. A tabby cat curls into his mother's hair. Patrick has seen his mother asleep with the cat like that, practically suctioned. Against his will, it grosses him out a little.

In the video, the Smog Monster, a wad of wet-looking gray cotton with static red eyes, has not yet met Godzilla. It hardly matters that it eventually meets Godzilla because in the end all that Patrick will remember about the movie is a scene that's not actually in the movie. It's something he figured must be happening off-screen based on the girls in their gym outfits collapsing and four men playing cards, incinerated. He remembers how the toxic, billowing Smog Monster sweeps through the sky and, as it passes between the white-gray sun and the gray-gray earth, its shadow passes over millions of people whose faces are like beads. Flesh blows from the people like sand, leaving millions of skeletons coating the hills, dead faces like the pattern in a printed fabric, a city-sized, TV-sized sheet stretched flat. He's not Jewish but he's seen old films on cable of mass Holocaust graves and the shot he imagines could be lifted from one as a slick, low-budget solution; he pictures the Japanese filmmakers scurrying like the scientists in the movie, but with armfuls of unspooling film instead of fists of sloshing beakers. If he were born just a few years later, he might not even know about film. This Holocaust landscape, the bodies making a pattern you could turn into wallpaper, is what he imagines whenever there are reports of genocide coming from the kitchen radio or one of the televisions that dot the house. But later, it's all blended up with this dumb video that moved him in the night.

He's wearing light blue cotton pajama bottoms and a thin sweatshirt his father wore playing hockey in college. His clavicle is incredibly delicate, poking out of the ring of the sweatshirt. Soon a professor, in subtitles, suggests that the Smog Monster rode in on a comet, a space pollution scientific freak organism. No one in Patrick's generation uses the word "ozone" to worry about the planet. Soon there's the scene where the girl's dancing on a stage in front of a multicolored projection of magnified pond scum. Patrick finds he's thinking of ice. He's picturing his father moving alone with his hockey stick across their neighbor's vast lawn that fills and freezes over every year. That afternoon he'd gone into his father's dresser for a sweatshirt and found the tape there, at the bottom of the drawer where porn ought to be. He then, in fact, set his watch for three a.m. and chose the third-floor TV room instead of the living room for that very reason. Imagine, porn rising past the hallway balcony like steam, curling under the doorway and creeping under the covers to where his father lay, a man, a man with a wife and a son, with a fine, high bed, with snow-covered land, borderless and unobstructed all the way to the deep pine woods.

Instead, Patrick is watching a boy in stupid-looking high-waisted shorts follow his grandfather along the beach. The movie is so badly made that when his attention wanders for even a moment he has no idea what's going on. There are drunken Japanese hippies having visions of people turning into fish. In a long sequence, first Godzilla and then the Smog Monster stares into the screen at a series of angles. It will be years before it occurs to him that this was meant to be a dramatic showdown. He and his first real girlfriend will have broken into an abandoned grocery store. It'd been fun, racing their absurdly large carts down the emptied aisles—the absence of color, the inorganic skeleton—until he hadn't seen her in a while. He'll be running the cart through produce, wads of colored tissue and packing straw floating on the naked geometric planes of display islands, and suddenly feel done with it, the need to *go* at the level of panic. He'll run the cart along the tops of the aisles—dairy, beverage, cereal, frozen food, natural, ethnic, snacks, baking goods—increasingly furious because he's been texting her and texting her. *Where ru?* Finally she's way down the other end of canned goods. She's deep in the lowest shelf, swallowed to her torso, her legs coming out of her ass in a stark V. For a second he'll think she's dead, something having shoved her in there. Then she emerges with a can held up like a torch. She says, "Look: a soup!" They lock eyes across the vast speckled linoleum. She's so happy, and he's so angry. He thinks, *pow*. He remembers sitting secretly among

furniture in the tip of a house that is pointing its nose to the moon, and above him nothing but the stratosphere.

When the movie's over Patrick brings the cassette with him to his room and slips it under the extra pillow. For a long time, he tries to sleep, facing it in the dark. He tries to think about the porn he'd expected, but his thoughts keep shifting back to the crumbling bodies, the masses of them in grainy gray and ashen white. It hurts. He longs for porn, but he can't make it happen in a way that's not horrible and sick.

In the morning, kitchen sounds rise past the balcony. Patrick's window is nearly covered in frost, a vast miniature white forest, and through the ice-branches he can see his father crossing the yard in his long brown coat and overboots, using a black branch for a walking stick, poking it into the snow. He can walk on the snow for a couple of steps but then crunches through. Cold comes off the window and the sun is soft and clean. His father, alternately light and heavy, comes off as funny. Patrick pulls his feather blanket around his shoulders and shuffles downstairs in his wool socks. His mother is holding their terrier on one arm and wiggling a frying pan over the stove with the other. In the pan are three eggs, whites oval, yolks off center in each. She's wearing a quilted bathrobe with a print version of gingham patches. Patrick uses a foot to pull a chair out from the table and then sits in it, not really facing the table, not really facing his mother, either. He's in a beam of sunlight. He blinks and yawns. He pulls at the blanket so he's not sitting on so much of it.

"I don't think I want an egg, Mom," he says.

"Someone'll eat it. You still sleepy?" She crouches to let the terrier hop off her arm. He shakes himself as if he's wet and then leaps into Patrick's lap. Patrick holds the little dog at arm's length and it licks at the sunny air. Patrick likes the dog, but he doesn't like it to lick him, and lately, the licking has been seeping into his overall opinion of the dog.

His father comes in, stamping, and then unclasps the dozen clasps on each overboot and pulls them off. He's wearing his slippers underneath, and he's got the newspaper. His mother turns the radio on and it sends out classical music. Strings. Copland?

"Brrrr. Chilly, chilly," his father says. After he hangs his coat on one of the pegs by the door he crosses to the fridge, mussing Patrick's hair as he passes by, sending the threads of dust in the sunbeam into tantrums. In a moment that no one notices, the dust plumes into the shape of the Smog Monster.

Patrick's father takes bread out and puts slices in the toaster. Soon they're all at the table. Toast, butter, jam, eggs, coffee, juice. Sometimes

when Patrick comes home from school after practice or late from a game his parents will be off somewhere in the house, but at the kitchen table will be his father's briefcase on one chair and his mother's briefcase on the chair opposite it, these abbreviated versions of them, like sentries.



THREE DAYS LATER IT'S A WEDNESDAY and at lunch Patrick and his friend Arbuckle, first name shunned and practically forgotten, get lost in conversation at the far end of the snow-covered soccer field where they like to sit on this extremely wide, ragged stump of a tree that's near the edge of the woods, but not really part of the woods. They don't know it, because it's their first year at the high school, but for ages it'd been a climbing tree, and only that summer had been proclaimed dead enough to be dangerous. Kids used to congregate at the tree, but now it's just a stump and no one cares about it.

So Patrick and Arbuckle get to class late, starting back across the field when they hear the bell, trying to run through the snow at first but then giving up, taking it easy, trudging with their heads low, arms folded, still talking, thinking something through. Then Arbuckle heads off for French and Patrick steps into his biology class but no one even looks at him as he enters, snow pressed into shapes quietly dropping from the treads of his boots. He stops a few steps in. The room feels funny. They're all watching the television on its wheeled cart. It sits at the front of the rows of one-armed desks, and Mr. Bernard is sitting in Patrick's—in the second row, watching. News is on. There's footage of raging, raging fire. It's raging in a box in the upper-right of the screen. Patrick's seen commercials for a videotape of fire you can play to make your television more festive—he and Arbuckle joked about buying it for his uptight parents, ages ago, when they saw it in a dollar bin. But they didn't buy it because after they thought of it, the joke was over.

This fire, however, is a real fire, raging in the city of Los Angeles. Something swooped overhead and dropped, or dropped something. Something fell burning from the sky and what is it, chemicals, flaming viruses, maybe nuclear, whatever it is, California is burning on the television and burning across the country. There's also no way to tell how far away the video is being shot from because looking at fire up close is pretty much the same as looking at fire far away, as long as it fills the screen. "My country," people say on the TV, anchors and men on the street. "Our country."

Patrick stays in his spot on the periphery. All around the room are posters of biology things. Definitive drawings of cross-sections of plants and animals. Everyone listens to the reporters, watching the fire. Landmarks are gone forever, museums and mansions enumerated by one after another correspondent. A series of explosions level the hills. One of Mr. Bernard's hands is clinging to the slender arm of Patrick's desk. He has a round head, glasses, and strings of black hair that his scalp shows through. He's got a quirk of smoothing his hand across them. He's about the same height and build as Patrick, and while Patrick has tried to picture the lives of some other teachers, he has never even thought about Mr. Bernard except in terms of biology. Now that Mr. Bernard is in his spot, Patrick follows the teacher's eyes to the intercom, back to the television, then back to the intercom. The speaker is dangling from its wires in a corner near the ceiling over the blackboard, but everyone knows it's done nothing but occasionally spit for months. Mr. Bernard's homeroom just does the pledge on their own. Notes come from the office, if anything. If Patrick moved to the front of the room, that could complete a kind of reversal, and the thought comes close, but doesn't actually cross his mind. He stays by the door. He is looking at Mr. Bernard for some ideas of what to think, but meanwhile, Mr. Bernard's mind is filled with the fire, and includes Patrick only as a sort of pixel among student-pixels massed over time. He's an okay teacher who occasionally, maybe every few years, gets swept up in a kid. He'll find himself thinking about the kid's life, and trying to do something to help the kid, and have to pull himself back.

The reporter they're watching gets a message in her ear to move farther from the billowing fire, and when she sends it back to the anchor Mr. Bernard says, "We'll wait and there'll be an announcement." None of the kids are saying anything, but two girls link fingers across the aisle. Outside, it's snowing again. Patrick lets his backpack slip to the floor and into the puddle from his boots. After a while Mr. Bernard says, "I have an announcement," but then the news anchor says something about the fires raging into San Diego, Santa Barbara, about speculations, who is responsible, and he doesn't say anything.

In the doorway, Patrick remembers another emergency with Mr. Bernard, back in September. One of the kids in their class had tried to kill himself by taking all the prescriptions he scrounged up in his house. It was supposed to be assembly where everyone processed together, and that had already happened, but the kid had been in their biology class before the coma, and the girl who had been his partner in collecting specimens had

been assigned to join another group, making a threesome. In class, the girl kept saying, "It's just not going to be the same." It came off a little like she was complaining about the group, and after about the third time she said it, Mr. Bernard lost his temper. Patrick had never seen a teacher lose his temper like that. He said, "Hold it, listen up, class," and then just went off. He was grasping a wooden yardstick for some reason. He wore such ridiculous plaid pants no one could tell if they were an intentional joke, but Patrick saw him shake, and in the doorway, he remembers being afraid the man was going to cry, praying and praying his teacher wouldn't cry. He remembers this vibrating hope against hope, he remembers not what Mr. Bernard said, but how angry it made him to see his teacher out of control like that, and then the memory dives back under the surface and his mind doesn't hook onto it again.

Mr. Bernard will always remember what he said. He said, "I know you're all freaking out and excited. I know it feels like this changes everything, and I know half of you are thinking that might be cool, even necessary. But let me tell you, I know several of you in this very room have experienced some real hardship. And some of you are going to learn very soon what tragedy is if you don't know it already. That, my friends, is life," he said. He dropped the yardstick accidentally and it made a huge smack hitting the floor. He'd been teaching for twenty years. He'd talked to kids whose parents beat each other, who were sick, dying, kids whose parents fucked them when they were babies. He'd had a refugee kid who never spoke, whose eyes rested on only the things *between* people, and who the fuck knows what happened in the world to do that to her. "I am here to tell you that nothing is changed," he'd said that day. "Ice ages come and go. Stars supernova and nothing is changed. Species go extinct every day. So you can take heart in that." After school, Patrick had said something to Arbuckle about Mr. Bernard losing it in class and never thought of it again, until now. In fact, three months later and the school is pretty used to one of them being off in a coma. It's what Mr. Bernard might call resilience.

"I have to go home," Mr. Bernard says, sick of it, rising from Patrick's desk and returning to his own. "If you want to stay, I'll stay here if you want me to stay, but otherwise I'm going."



BUSES AREN'T AROUND, the parking lot is crazy, and Patrick gets a ride with a senior who lives on his street. Sara has a lot of light brown, almost golden fluffy hair and even though she's not a big deal at the school, she

doesn't usually say anything to him. Their parents know each other, but even as children, Sara and Patrick never got along. It's no loss either way. Practically all he knows about her is she's adopted and she's part black. Biracial, which sounds like a part of an insect. Multiethnic, which sounds like a ride at a carnival. Sara's got a black Trans Am with a red interior—not the kind of car most kids go for in this district in this moment in history—and her hair really stands out against it. Her eyes are sunk and blurry, and while some kids look a little dazed, and some kids are running around like they're high on sugar, Sara has clearly been crying. Maybe she knows someone in California. Patrick had an older cousin in Santa Cruz for a while but now he's back.

Her hair rises in the wind in one fluffy mass.

"You okay?" he says. Her hair looks like the Smog Monster, and while it's true that he doesn't like her, it's such a juvenile thought he pushes it aside.

"This is all so very fucked up," Sara says, shaking her head. She's being nice, that's one thing being stripped and raw can make you, is nice, but he's skeptical. He thinks she's so immersed in what she's feeling that she's assuming everyone feels exactly like her and *that's* what makes her be so nice. She's feeling her commonality with all humankind, and it doesn't matter what he feels.

They're rising and falling along the slick, curving road. Long rows of evergreens line some of the properties, and acres of snow separate the road from the houses it leads to. There's an old donkey who lives with a pony in a post-and-rail paddock with a little wooden shelter. When they pass the paddock, the donkey is lying in the snow, curled like a dog on a hearth, and the pony is standing over it. Gray donkey, white pony, dark rail fence, pale, pale sky.

Sara wants to drive him right up to his house, she *insists* on it, but it's a very long driveway and though it's plowed, it's icy. They have an extremely grown-up sounding conversation, a kind of I'll-get-the-check, no-no-I'll-get-the-check exchange over whether or not she should drive all the way down the driveway. Patrick wins by saying he wants to get the mail and when he gets out he just says, "Thanks. Really Sara, the walk will do me good," which completely freaks him out for a second, like the remark comes direct from the future. He gets the mail but instead of walking down the driveway, he uses his father's footprints across the loping yard. They're left from days ago, iced over and just that one set.

Inside, Patrick's parents are upstairs in their bed on the green comforter in their work clothes, watching California burn on TV. Their shoes are in

the hall, empty and at odd angles, as if the people in them had disintegrated mid-step. When Patrick arrives in the doorway, his parents hold out their arms and he gets up into the high walnut bed with them. Patrick's mother shifts so that he can share the green pillow she's leaning on. He can smell that she's had a cigarette. The cat's in his father's lap, her tail dripping over onto Patrick's leg, shifting like a hunting snake. The terrier hops up and his mother distracts it from the cat by nudging it playfully with her feet. The terrier bites at her toes and then lies down, leaning into the curves of her arches. The TV continues its coverage. The fire is spreading. It's past Fresno. It's consuming the state but has yet to cross over its lines. Suspects accumulate, worldwide. The anchor chokes up, waxes and relates. Sometimes Patrick's father offers an analysis and sometimes his mother offers an analysis. They talk about who could have done it, who in the world. Patrick points to the map on the television and says things like, "I didn't know that country was pronounced like that. I think that lady said it wrong. Is it bigger or smaller than, say, Kansas?" Or he asks, "Is stocking up dumb? Are we stocked up?"

But mostly he finds he's feeling wonderful and warm, there between his parents, with the cat and the dog. It's such a big and carefully furnished house for there to be so many lives in those few square feet of space. He thinks, *I am in the moment*. Nothing is dirty. Everything is either very near, or very far. The fan turns overhead, pushing heated air down.



AT TEN P.M., Patrick is already in his bed, reading by the light of a little clip-on book light that came with a magazine subscription. It's cheap and the bulb doesn't fit right in its socket. The light keeps flickering. His father is upstairs in the TV room, still watching the coverage.

They'd eaten cheese sandwiches for dinner, in his parents' room, a picnic on the comforter. They thought about ordering pizza, but no one wanted to go wait at the end of the driveway. His mother cried for a while. "Your whole generation is shot," she said to Patrick, and then tried to take it back. Patrick cried a little, too, at this idea of being part of a generation, but also because his mother was crying. She'd taken her suit jacket off and had her bathrobe on over her blouse and trousers. She fell asleep like that, among them. He wanted to talk it all through with Arbuckle, but because Arbuckle's family resists technology as harmful, they have only one telephone and one telephone line. When Patrick called, Arbuckle said they weren't allowed to tie it up. He said they had people in California.

Now, in bed, Patrick's reading a superhero comic, one from years ago when he used to read them all the time. In this one, the main superhero girl is losing control of her powers, they're just getting way out of hand. She's hovering in space about to destroy an entire planet and she can't stop herself. The bulb in his tiny lamp is flickering and then, just as she's sure her head will explode, a soft beam of light slides in and out of his window and he hears a far-off impact. He gets to his knees and looks out the window. Far across the yard and up at the road at the end of the driveway there's a streetlamp, and the lamp shines a diffuse oval on the ground. The black road and the snow divide the lit space. There's a car in the light, crossing the line. Patrick gets his glasses from the night table and then he can see that the car has crashed into the mailbox. The silver mailbox itself is in the yard, shining in the car's headlights, and the headlights stretch toward the house like the antennae of a bug from another world.

He listens for his father or mother to respond in some way, but they don't. He puts on his slippers and pulls a big wool sweater on over the pajamas and sweatshirt he's been wearing to bed every night. Then he trots across the landing and peeks into his parents' room. His mother is there, still asleep. He trots upstairs far enough to hear the television still going, a newscaster interviewing a rescuer just off his shift, the sound of the fire like static behind their voices.

At the kitchen door he takes his father's overboots and clasps the clasps over his slippers and the legs of his pajamas. He puts on a hat, a brown one with earflaps and strings, as if you'd ever tie them under your chin. He takes a flashlight from the utility closet and stuffs a pair of gloves into his waistband, but as soon as he steps outside, the cold smacks him hard enough that he puts them on. The driveway is densely iced so he jogs at the edge, where at least there are crumbled pieces for traction, but still he slips twice, catching himself on the snowbank. Even before he recognizes the car, he recognizes the fuzzy cloud of hair over the steering wheel. He's worried for a second that he's about to encounter something he's not prepared for, something that could change his life. If her face is gone, he thinks, if I lift her hair and she has no face . . .

But Sara raises her head and her face is intact, puffy though. She watches him approach and opens the car door as he nears. She shifts in her seat, putting her feet on the snow. He doesn't come all the way up to her. She's still older, she's still a senior, and even though he's feeling a softness toward her, part of him knows it'll be short-lived because she is, after all, okay.

“So, you’re okay?” he says.

“Do you think it’ll go?”

He crunches a few steps around to the front of the car and there’s a place in its nose that’s pretty smushed. Still, the hood is down and intact, and although the bumper is twisted and part of it’s come undone, it’s not blocking anything that he can see. Part of the post that held the mailbox is sort of impaling it, between the body and the bumper, coming up across the radiator grille, which is bent back to accommodate it. If the post doesn’t hold to the ground, though, he thinks the car ought to go.

“Want me to try to back it out?”

“It’s my car, Patrick.” It’s a rebuke, and he almost snaps back at her, something about leaving his warm bed, but when he looks at her through the windshield the expression on her face stops him, and he watches her hear herself, and change her mind. Then she says, “Why don’t you get in? If we can get it going, I’ll show you something.”

He gets in. The car backs out pretty much immediately. He pulls the brake and then gets out and looks with his flashlight. The mailbox post is still wedged up there but when he looks under the car, the end of it hovers over the pavement maybe half a foot. He gets back in. “I think it’ll be okay,” he says. “But go slow.”

“Fuck it,” Sara says.

They go pretty fast, but he’s not scared. Her face is lit by the green glow of the instrument panel and it strikes him what a baby face she has. It’s a little thrilling, the turn things have taken, driving away from the house in the night. If it was Arbuckle, he’d have some pot, but if it was Arbuckle, they wouldn’t have a car.

Patrick doesn’t remember it, but the way his family met Sara’s was that when they’d first moved into the house, back when Patrick was seven, Sara’s parents came over. “It was so nice,” Patrick’s mother said when she mentioned it to Patrick. This was around when he started middle school and was worried about all the kids he knew from elementary who wouldn’t be there, and all the kids he didn’t know, who would. He’d asked what it was like when they first moved into the neighborhood, after his father finished his degrees and finally had a real salary. Sara and her family were minor characters in his mother’s story about fitting in—it was their first real place, she said, a place of their own, but his family had roots here and hers did not, so it was a little uneven-feeling at first. Sara’s parents came over when there were still boxes everywhere. Patrick had pictured a dumpy mom in a kind of summery dress with strawberries on it, and a

gray father in a warped fedora, holding a casserole with silver potholders. His mother said, "When I saw them, I thought, what a nice neighborhood this must be. But then they gave us flyers from their church and it didn't seem like they were just being nice anymore." Still, after it turned out that Patrick's mother represented her company when it was a client of Sara's father's department at his company, sometimes the couples paired up at social functions, and a few times when Patrick's family had a party, Sara's family came. Once, they set up a buffet in the living room and Patrick and Sara watched from the balcony. Sara got bored quickly, and took her book to the third-floor TV room. Patrick stayed watching. He was ten, maybe eleven. From above, the grown-ups really did look like aliens, in their shiny clothing. Their arms were coming right out of their heads, the little nubs of their feet poking out the edges of their pant legs.

"I was going to California," says Sara. Her hair glows warmly around her face in the black-green light. "Not tonight—I'll show you where I was going tonight. But the whole idea was to graduate and then get the fuck to California."

"You know people there?"

"No," she says, annoyed. "I mean yes, like I have aunts there, and they have progeny. But I was going besides that." She shakes her head as if that will get rid of being annoyed, but then stops, and he thinks it must hurt from the crash. "I mean, I don't care if those people are there. It's such a big place. It never even mattered that they were there. I could just go, you know, oranges, sunshine. Better people. I was going to go there and change my life, and now it's gone."

"Are you an actress?" he says, instead of asking if these are real biological aunts she's talking about, which is what he wants to know.

"Fuck no. Jesus, Patrick, don't you have any imagination?"

He can't believe she has the power to hurt him, but when she says this, she does. He hears static. Even though he plays soccer, Patrick primarily pegs himself as an imaginative person. He reads a lot of pulp sci-fi novels, but he also reads a lot of books on history, intellectual things. He thinks of himself as an imaginative person in a school full of unimaginative people. A town of them, too. A whole world. But when Sara accuses him, he can see, for a second, like a door opening in a room so dark you never knew there was a door, how he has no imagination at all.

Sara makes a fairly wild turn and the car slides a bit before settling into a more controlled bumping across the icy gravel road. "Don't you want to know where we're going?"

He waits for her to go ahead and tell him, but she doesn't, so then he says, "Yes." She raises and lowers her eyebrows, something he can't really see but still manages to picture is happening. When she still doesn't answer, he thinks quickly and then says, "No."



IT TURNS OUT IT'S A CAVE, and Patrick will not forget it.

They'd parked the car. They brought his flashlight. They pushed through bare thorny bushes to a tractor path so deep in sealed snow it could be a frozen creek. They hardly broke through at all. Somewhere in their American history, Patrick's family owned a lot of land, and he wondered if they might have owned these woods, these mountains. In the darkness the side of a mountain rose. As they walked, the mountain shifted from brush-covered and snow-buried mulch to stony walls and what actually was a frozen creek running along it. Sara took his arm, the one not holding the flashlight, pulled him down the embankment, and they crossed the frozen creek. It was cold, but with no wind, so not cold enough to hurt. When they came to the cave he hardly knew he was in it until she had him seated on a mound of pine needles.

He shines the flashlight around, and when the beam hits her eyes they flash yellow. He tells himself she's a girl, not an animal, but he can't help it—it's a cave, she's immersed in it, and her eyes flashed. He can't tell what she's doing, touching the walls, looking for something she left?

"Cool," he says. "I didn't know there were caves out here." It's a small enough space that it seems stupid to ask if they can make a fire, but he asks anyway. "I know, I know," he says, laughing. "But it's a cave. I had to ask."

"No," she says. He can hear her smiling. "We can have a fire." She makes a fire right outside the opening, so the smoke has somewhere to go but they can still catch some heat. It's amazing that she can, that in the middle of snow she can just shove around and gather enough branches. She uses a cigarette lighter from her pocket, and a twisted-up receipt. It was dry before it snowed, and now that the snow's frozen, the twigs hiss and pop but get it going fine.

Again, he feels cozy. He can't help it. California is burning, the fire gobbling Eureka, all that marijuana up in smoke, people and animals are dying, the air is poisoned, the ocean is boiling, fishes making for Hawaii as fast as their flippers will carry them, rock tops exploding from sea cliffs like missiles, and he feels cozy, trying to figure out if maybe he's *attracted* to Sara. He knows the one about how people have sex in the last moments

before the end of the world, but it doesn't feel like the end of the world. Is that why he doesn't feel like he ought to be having sex? She has that black car, and she built a fire for him, and they're in a cave, in the night in woods that suddenly feel like his own. Nice contained crackling little shadowcasting world. Her puffy face is so soft-looking and her hair comes out of her hat like clouds from behind a sun. She takes her hat off and shakes the hair. Patrick takes off his overboots and sits there on his pine needles in his slippers in the cave, feeling at home. He holds his hat in his lap and ties and unties the earflap strings.

It strikes him that he doesn't have to go back, not if he doesn't want to. Lately Arbuckle has been becoming a Marxist. When Patrick said, "So you want to kill millions of people and make everyone poor?" Arbuckle said, "Marxism is a critique of capitalism." Then when Patrick asked his father about it, his father laughed. He said, "Tell Arbuckle to let me know when he comes up with a better system," and when Patrick went back to Arbuckle with that, Arbuckle said, "Not to disrespect your dad, but you don't have to have all the answers to think there's a problem, you just have to think there might be a better way."

In the cave Patrick thinks, but I *like* my home.

"How's it been at your house?" he asks Sara. He's shining his flashlight around the space, sweeping the light along the walls. There's not much space to cover but still, it feels like what he's doing is sweeping, covering the space in a methodical way, the way a scenting dog covers a field.

"Dad's out of town. Mom worked late because everyone went home. She likes the office quiet. She said keep a list of who calls to say they're okay."

"Harsh," Patrick says.

"I guess she's upset but you'd never know it. She says work is therapeutic. And otherwise you let them win. She says, *gotta put food on the table*. I hate therapy."

"Like you're going to starve."

"I know, really." Then she says, "I don't think just sitting here is moral." She's saying words offhand, but he has never seen anyone so stripped as she seems to be right now. She's phasing in and out as he moves the light. Her hair keeps reminding him of things. The Smog Monster, of course. Then with the hat it reminded him of fried eggs. Now it's the most silent explosion in history.

He keeps moving the light from the flashlight along the walls. It's hard to see past its dim concentric circles to the rock itself. It's impossible to tell what color anything is. He thinks about how it feels in his bed in the

dark, the house like a layer cake, like geographic time. He thinks about generation after generation. Sometimes his parents say, "When this house is yours," and sometimes they say, "The world is your oyster," or "When you leave the nest." Meanwhile, beyond what Patrick will ever know, Sara's having a fantasy. She's running through a field of dry summer wheat with a guiding moon, holding a lantern high, near her head. Within the lantern's light is only wheat, her head, her invisible pounding heart, but her mind is *reaching*. In her other hand, she's carrying a message with a wax seal. It's something she expects to have to eat once it's delivered. She's wearing a billowing white shirt and a leather vest that laces up the front. The fantasy takes place during the Revolutionary War. Or it's a vision of the future.

At some point, Patrick realizes he's been looking, all this time, sweeping the walls, for ancient drawings.

They stay in their round little cave and look at their little half-in-half-out fire. The harder they look at the fire, the closer it seems to get. At some point Sara notices that for one thing, she's basically trapped them in the cave. If something came from behind, like a wild animal, they'd have to go through the fire to get out. But there's nothing behind them except the back of the cave. Something would have to come to life from nothing in order to get them.



TWO WEEKS AND TWO DAYS LATER California is kaput. It's a heaving, flattened, blowing, billowing mass of ash and soot and toxicity. It's Saturday morning, and Patrick's parents are eating breakfast side by side in bed, kind of an ordeal because they had to go downstairs, make it, and then carry it up on trays. The cat and the terrier are off somewhere, hunting. Patrick comes in with a cup of coffee and sits in the walnut armchair between the door and their bed, sipping. He has a clear view of the room, the antiques that furnish it, his mother and father floating among comforters, the line of their sight that leads to the news. The television beams steadily from a converted armoire with shutters poised like wings to contain it. Televisions should be popping and fizzling out all over town, but they are inexhaustible.

Sara's gone. After the cave, Patrick had felt bright and awake but she was sleepy so he drove the black car. He had never driven a car with a sleeping person in it. Along the way, the post fell from its nose and rattled to the side of the road. At the top of his driveway, he stopped the car and had a few moments of looking at Sara. He touched her right where the

edge of her sweater met her neck, to wake her up. Then they both got out, crossed paths wordlessly, and she took her place in the driver's seat.

She yawned. She said, "The snow's pink," and then drove away.

A few days later her parents called his parents. Patrick listened on the TV room extension. Now it's two weeks and she still hasn't been back to school, just hijacked the disaster for him and disappeared. The parents think she's gone looking for her real family. Her mother's reported it to the police. She's making posters. She said, "We tried to give her stability in this crazy world."

Patrick keeps expecting the disappearance to show up on the news, but he can't even remember if this is the kind of thing that would be news before California. He keeps having dreams they're in the cave, that it's the end of the world and he's seducing her. He can't help it. Things get pretty pornographic. Now, now, now, she says. Now, now. No. Now. Sometimes there are cave drawings on the wall of horses and buffalo, arrows flying, and sometimes the drawings come to life and trample them with delicate massaging hooves while they're fucking. Why is it surprising, he wonders, that drawings made of outlines, drawings that are translucent, worn over thousands of years, have almost no weight? Why is he so sure they ought to be able to kill him?

He tried to talk everything through with Arbuckle at lunch on the tree stump at school, surrounded by old snow. Footprints were everywhere, even though there was no reason for anyone to go out in the field. He tried not to do what he's seen boys like him do in movies, movies that he can't tell if they're about him or making fun of him. He didn't say, "She was hot and I could of fucked her," the way he would in one of those movies. He said, "She took me to a cave, and I felt like I was moving through time."

Arbuckle said, "If she didn't get kidnapped it's irresponsible to take off like that."

Patrick felt his insides grow taut, heat up. "That's bullshit," he said. "One thing about Sara, she's deep." He knows California doesn't exist, but the way he imagines it, that's still where she's gone. He knows the coast is a soup of ash and mud from what's left of the ocean, but he still thinks of her there, swooping over this primordial glop, as if to witness the emergence of something like a whole new planet, as if she could be the one creating whatever will become of it.

"Deep or *stupid*," Arbuckle said, like this happened every day. Patrick couldn't believe it. He kept looking at Arbuckle and thinking, *Is this my generation?* Arbuckle kept talking. He explained how the secret money

behind the government did it to California and was trying to put the blame all over the map. “It’s our own damn fault,” he said, solemnly. “We did it to ourselves.”

“Did what?” Patrick yelled. “You’re fine. Sara’s gone!”

“Where the hell did all this *Sara* come from?” Arbuckle yelled back. “All you ever talk about anymore is Sara.”

Patrick said nothing. He just stared at Arbuckle as if they were at opposite ends of the vast white field.

Not to mention, the kid from their class still hasn’t woken up, doesn’t know a thing about any of it.

Back home in the armchair, Patrick is watching his mother trying to keep the tray balanced on her knees as she maneuvers her butter knife into the butter. Folded and refolded sections of newspaper bob in the green waves of the comforter. The television pursues its intrigues. He pictures himself and the TV both in orbit around his parents in their bed. He zeroes in on his father, who seems to be growing a beard.

“Dad,” he says, “Did you know there’s a debate on the Internet about whether Godzilla is a boy or a girl?”

“No, I did not know that,” he says.

“Did you know that Godzilla was born of U.S. atrocities perpetrated against Japan but by the seventies turned into the defender of Tokyo?”

“I may,” says his father, “have been vaguely aware.” He gives his focus to Patrick. “Why?”

“Well,” Patrick says, “Because I’ve been wondering: how come you have *Godzilla versus the Smog Monster* hidden in your sweater drawer?”

Patrick’s mother laughs and puts down her knife. “You have *Godzilla versus the Smog Monster* hidden in your sweater drawer?”

“What are you doing in my sweater drawer?” asks his father. Patrick plucks at the front of the hockey sweatshirt, to point it out. “Oh,” says his dad, and goes back to his muffin. “I used to love that sweatshirt,” he says. Goofy crumbs tumble.

“No, Dad, really,” says Patrick. “A person doesn’t just hide things for no reason.” Somewhere in the night he made a decision that if he wanted to say something, he’d just say it, given the circumstances. There’s an umbrella leaning against the side of the chair, and half consciously, he picks it up and holds it in his lap. Across the room, his father’s face shifts—it’s not a shadow falling over, not a sudden light in his eyes—there isn’t something inside him trying to get out, not anything like that. All it is, is his father looks frightened, truly frightened, just for a moment, but in a way

that Patrick has never seen before in his father, or perhaps anyone. Then he recovers. He looks at his son, and he says, “I forgot.”

“Come on, honey,” says his mother. “Why do you have *Godzilla versus the Smog Monster* hidden in your sweater drawer? After all these years,” she says to Patrick, winking, “it’s good to know we still have *mystery*.”

“I forgot,” his father insists, and this time Patrick doesn’t believe him, not for a second. He knows the one about the boy realizing his father is not so strong and wise after all, is maybe even a cheat, a crook, a scoundrel. He finds that the umbrella he’s holding has shifted in his grasp so that it’s pointing at the bed, and the way he’s holding it, he’s shocked to notice, is like he’s holding his dick. He pushes it off his lap and then reaches down and picks it up again. He wonders what to do with it, and then puts it back exactly where it was before, leaning against the side of the chair.

On one wall of the bedroom is a hunt print, painted by a once-famous painter for Patrick’s great grand-someone, depicting land that used to be in the family. Horses and dogs leap a log, no fox in sight. Across from it there’s a gilt-framed botanical, the kind that shows how a plant goes from seed to seeding. Who knows where that came from. They echo, wall to wall. His mother is propped on her elbow, curled up a little, gazing into the ashes on TV.

“It’s so weird,” his father says. He stares at a correspondent who is standing on the edge of Nevada.

“Really Dad, it doesn’t matter.”

“What?” says his father.

“Never mind,” says Patrick. There’s his father, lost, as if lost in a vast tundra. It’s the first time Patrick’s looked at his father and really seen himself there, in the past and the future at once. It shakes him. It makes a little dust rise. He tries to think of reasons to hide a video, other than what’s recorded on it—ways it could be symbolic as an object. He thinks, something he watched when he cheated on my mother. He thinks, something he never watched because the day he rented it he embezzled money at work and got away with it ever since. And that’s the limit of his imagination. For years, when he dreams embarrassing dreams of Sara, she’s the Smog Monster, swooping over hills and valleys, a friendly toxic pollution freak from outer space. But one day when he’s a man, out there living in a freezing city, such as it is, working at a job, playing in a band at least for now, he looks out his window through the frost forest and what he sees, finally, does not feel like land that is his or belongs to him in any way.