

“The Mountain and The City”

by Brian Martinez

I can't imagine living in a house, one of those real houses I see on the Outside with Shingles and a Garage. Too many Windows and Doors, too much to go wrong. Edges and corners put weakness in the creases, make the Silvery Tape fail. Constant work and upkeep with Silvery tape. I wouldn't have any minutes to myself that way, no minutes to listen to my Records. I bet I wouldn't last a month like that, all that Silvery Tape and no Records to keep me right.

Time to check it again.

The Silvery Tape is beautiful, how it catches the candlelight around the windows and over the Kitchen Vent, the soft-glowing veins, it helps me to remember, when I see it, what Christmas Lights looked like. Nothing's worth more than Silvery Tape, at least that I've found. Nothing's more valuable than staying alive and nothing keeps me alive better than Silvery Tape.

Without Silvery Tape, how would I keep the Outside outside? How would I keep the Watch on the Watch Arm or the Axe on the Axe Leg?

Smooth the Tape with your Gloves. Stand on the Bunk-bed and feel the seal where the Wall and the Ceiling collide. Double-check. All around the Front Door, all around the Small Window, all around the Shower Door glass, from the top of the strip to the bottom. Have a system and stick to it. That's what life is.

I stay silent when I check the Tape so I can listen for the Voice of the Outside. Don't want to hear the Voice coming through the Silvery Tape, no, never want that. Need to catch the hissing, catch the whistle of the air, the Bastard Air. My Gloves find a spot right above the Stove where the Silvery Tape is getting weak and I don't panic when I find this because panic makes Death.

Don't panic. Grab the roll from the Belt, rip a strip long enough and stick it on and patch it up. Smooth the Tape with Glove fingers. Rub the veins with your fingertips. Double-check. Stop breathing and listen through the Mask and don't move until you're sure the voice isn't there.

I almost didn't notice it's five o'clock. That means its time to wind the Watch. This part makes me nervous but I look forward to it, such an honor I've been given, Keeper of The Time, that's my title, that's what I do. It makes the Watch so important, having that job, and that makes me important. No more machines in the sky to track it, no more men who read the Sun. No more batteries to run the clocks and that leaves me and the Watch and the Watch Arm and that's me and that's why I'm important because I keep the time, Keeper of the Time. I've done it for so long, don't know how long though because I don't keep the calendar, not me. I have enough to do with the Silvery Tape and the time.

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I sit on the Bunk-bed and pull the small Table over so I can work. The Table, I remember finding it on the Outside, just laying there in the Wood tangled up in a bush I was collecting berries from. My Gloves were running with juice and my Mask was fogging up from the anticipation of boiling and eating them. Then I stopped because there it was with its legs sticking up in the Air, Bastard Air, and it was such a surprise I didn't know what to do. Right off I thought it was a Munie trap. No, I knew it was. I dropped the plastic bag to the grass and cut the Silvery Tape to pull the Axe from my Axe Leg and started waving it around at the Wood screaming, "Come and get me, you Munie Beasts! Come get me!" There were no sounds, no movement, only the small, fat Beasts scattering through the berry bushes. No one was there. I really don't have to say no one was there because I'm still alive, but I still like to hear myself say it. That was a good feeling, still being alive. And I had a new Table, too, someone long ago in the Real Times had thrown it out.

On the Table are the Tweezers where I left them. It's easier to wind up the Watch this way because the little metal arms are hard to get a grip on with Gloves, even with the grooves cut into their heads.

Try and the fingers keep slipping. Instead, hold the Watch up. Bring it close to the Mask until its glass face is touching your plastic face. Slip the points of the tool into the grooves, pinch the arm-head and slowly, very slowly, twist the Tweezers while holding the Watch against the Mask face until it starts to spin and you hear the little tic-tic-tic, but be careful! A wrong move here can destroy the Watch and then time is lost forever.

It starts to spin with the tic-tic-tic, and I keep it slow, evenly spaced, so I don't dislodge one of the tiny gears inside, the sound I hear in nightmares, and when its done I make sure the Silvery Tape holding the Watch to the Watch Arm still has a good seal and I push the table back to its place against the wall and I finally breathe.

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Hungry, time to eat but I know what that means. Saw the Cabinet when I woke up at four pm and know I need to go to the Cavern to restock the Cans but I'm not looking forward to it, never do. Made a list of what's running low: Toilet Paper, Canned Food, Matches. A good night is any night I can stay inside the Trailer and wind the Watch and check the Silvery Tape and listen quietly to my Records, quiet enough so the Munies can't hear, but that's not tonight.

Tonight isn't a good night.

I open the can and eat it all, scrape it clean and throw it with the Plastic Fork into the black Garbage Bag with the other Forks and Cans and I tie it shut with a double-knot, deflating it against my crinkly chest so it isn't any bigger than it has to be and place it in front of the Door. Then I grab the Silvery Tape roll and the Night Eyes and take them with me to remove the seal from the Shower Door. I step inside, check the Floor Drain for breaks in the seal but it looks good so I close the Shower Door and tape it up.

Take the Mask off. Release the clips around the neck and hear the ss-s-sss of the air

pushing in, then hold your breath and hope its Trailer Air, not Bastard Air. Naked, take a bottle of Rubbing Alcohol from the Shelf and douse the Suit, then yourself. Rub it in, feel how cold it is, don't miss anything. A dry inch can mean your life.

It stings at my Eyes and they water up. They get angry at me when I do this. I put the empty Bottle back on the Shelf and dry off with the Towel, my skin soft and pink like a worm's. Air doesn't touch it much and the sweat and steam keep it moist all the time, gummy, like when people used to take baths in bathtubs but stayed in too long. The Suit is like a bath I take too long, but it's myself I bathe in.

Put on the Night Eyes. Flip the switch and the world goes green. Dread the day the Night Eyes run out of battery. Put the Suit on. Then the Mask.

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With the Axe in my Axe Hand and the Garbage Bag in the other I head into the Wood where the Trees scream and scream at me. It gets like this when the Bastard Air gets warm, the things in the Trees get so loud it makes me dizzy and I want to run back Inside. The Trailer Door is already sealed back up with Silvery Tape, though, guarding against the Bastard Air and giving sure sign of Munies when I return. If I ever return to find the Silvery Tape ripped, hanging loose or torn or lifted up, I know to turn around and leave, without a sound, and never come back.

I can remember a time, faint but it's there, back in the Real Times, when I enjoyed being Outside. It used to mean sport and play and running around with friends, kicking things and throwing things but for fun, not for the reasons I kick and throw now. I think my mother, this almost sounds like a joke or maybe a dream I'm mistaking for real, used to tell me to go Outside to get Fresh Air. That seems so ridiculous, if I'm right, like it can't be true, no one could have been that stupid, but it's important to remember the Real Times were very different times from now. All the rules were different then, before the Bastard Air. People even took showers with water. And the cities, well, the cities were cities.

The stars are so bright up there, like a spray of blood against a dark wall, except the blood is green from the Night Eyes. Important to remember how much Bastard Air is there between me and the stars.

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Something is watching me from the Wood.

It's not a Munie, I know that from the eyes. It's a Beast of the Wood that wants me for food. I'm going for Supplies and it is, too, but to the Beasts I'm the Supplies, and I understand that. I don't understand the Munies, who kill to kill.

It's a quick run from the Trailer to the Cavern using the Trail through the Wood, three minutes and ten seconds is my average with two minutes and seventeen seconds my best, says the Watch, but that's without anything in my Hands. Five minutes thirty-four seconds is the average with Supplies. Once, and I don't want to do that again, it was eight minutes nine seconds, but that was with Supplies and with running into that Munie and using the Axe on it.

See it behind the Trees, watching with its green eyes. Keeping distance and choosing the right time. Keep the Axe out. Keep eye contact with it. It won't attack until it sees your back or your weakness. Hide both.

I think it's one of those Beasts Real People used to keep Inside their houses in the Real Times, feeding them and caring for them. Can't remember what they were called. There are so many names I've forgotten because I haven't said them since I was small and like anything else a name dies when you don't use it. Doesn't matter now because it's hungry, and hungry things don't have names.

Still at least one minute forty seconds from the cavern and the Beast in the Wood is impatient, coming closer through the Trees. The tongue in its mouth drips with spit and its eyes don't blink and I know I don't have time to get to the Cavern before it loses control and jumps on me. Even if I fight it it'll rip the Suit with its first bite or scratch and I can't let that happen.

If the Bastard Air got in I wouldn't fight, I would let the Beast finish me. Better to be Supplies than a Munie.

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No time left. Do it now. Attack it before it attacks you. Use the Axe to scare it or kill it, get the Supplies and return to the Trailer.

With the Axe in my Axe Hand and the Garbage Bag in the other I run into the Wood, right at the Beast. I'm waving the Axe and shaking the Bag to look loud and noisy and I'm screaming inside the Mask and it comes back at my Ears and makes me dizzy. The Beast tenses up and gets smaller, then turns and runs the other way. I keep running, running and screaming and shaking and waving in case the Beast was thinking of backing off and then returning and attacking when I turn my Back. I haven't run in so long and it feels strange on the Legs. The muscles have become another name I let die.

The Beast breaks free of the Wood and runs into the clear. I follow it out and don't stop the noises until it's far away, far down the slope of the Mountain and into the Lower Wood, and then I stop and see where I am. I haven't looked at it since before I can remember, the City down there at the bottom of the Mountain, dark and dead under the stars. I can make out its shape with the Night Eyes.

Listen. Notice the trees have stopped screaming. Life is something always screaming, when one starts another stops.

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At the mouth of the Cavern I listen, like always, listen to it. The sounds in there echo so much it makes it hard for anyone to hide Inside. Any shuffle or sniff repeats, gets louder, travels, and Munies aren't good at staying still, so any Munie in there would give itself away quick. Isn't a big chance of that happening, a Munie in a dark place, but it's important to be safe, take no chances, ever.

I only hear water drips. Then, when I'm standing Inside, the squeaks of the Leatherwings far down, but I ignore those because Leatherwings leave me alone and I leave them alone, everyone doing what they have to do. So I walk through the Cavern

and I'm careful of the waxy, wet Spikes that grow from the Floor and the Ceiling and I find the metal Stairs, built by Real people in the Real Times when they used to visit here, and I use them to go down. It's a scary place full of scary things but I feel safer the deeper I go into the ground.

Find the Supplies. Take what you need, Toilet Paper, Canned Food, Matches, and get out. Return to the Trailer.

At the bottom the Cavern opens up. The Ceiling is so high the waxy, wet spikes aren't trouble for my Head, only my Feet, and I imagine what it would be like if I could reach Inside the Mask to the switch for the Night Eyes and turn them off, stand here in no light, no light at all, but the thought of all that black around me and above me makes the Air push in and out of the Mask Mouth faster. I have to watch the water rushing and bubbling past me for one minute six seconds until I feel like I can walk again.

I pass the Waterfall, small but loud and I always have to wipe the mist from the Mask, and then I'm at the Yellow Room, which I call because of the walls. I'm happy to see the Supplies are where I left them, only one box chewed on by a Leatherwing or some other Beast with teeth that are tiny and useless against boxes.

By my count I can live one year four months on these Supplies. I'll think about that in one year three months.

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The Silvery Tape wasn't touched so I peel it off. Inside I get the roll and tape it up again, always like this, taped on the Inside when I'm Inside, taped on the Outside when I'm Outside. If I could tape both sides I would but it's not possible, so I just do the one side and I have to be okay with that.

I put the Supplies away and sit in front of the Record Player where I've wanted to be. I pick a Record I found in the living room of a cabin close to here I and lay it on the bottom part and put the Needle to it. The electric ones don't work anymore, nothing electric has worked since the Real Times, so I built this out of the bottom parts of an electric one plus a Sewing Needle and an Oil Funnel. When I spin the Record with my Finger the Sewing Needle picks up the sound and speakers it through the Oil Funnel. The sound is low but that's how it should be so no one can hear it but me.

Out of all the Records I've found, this one is my favorite. That's because the man playing the piano speaks a good amount, and because of him I know some words I wouldn't know if I didn't listen, like Beautiful and Cherry. I think Cherry is a nicer word for Eyeball. Beautiful I don't know yet, but I like the way it sounds.

Spin the record. Put your Ear inside the Oil Funnel. Listen to the music but don't listen loud. The Munies wander up the Mountain sometimes, and their hearing is much better than their seeing.

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I wake in the morning. This is strange because I sleep in the day and live in the night, have to, and my Body is used to this. I sleep well and never wake in the morning unless I hear something or something is wrong.

Something is wrong. Get up, grab the Axe.

Silently, at the speed of a Slime Grass Beast I get to my feet and take the Axe to the Door so I can listen for the Voice of the Outside. It's important not to move so the Suit doesn't crinkle and spoil my hearing. My Body is warning me about something, one of the dangers, Bastard Air or Beasts or-

A loud bang at the Wall makes me jump, makes the Trailer shake. I stay still and sweat in the Suit and hope it's a Bear Beast. They come close sometimes if they smell food. As hard as I try to keep everything shut, the Beasts can smell everything I do. They go away when they get bored or tired or stop being interested in things they can't reach.

The Doorknob rattles in front of me and I stop breathing. I raise the Axe and it rattles again. Something is trying to open it from Outside. Something with hands.

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For thirty-nine minutes nineteen seconds I hear it going around the Trailer trying to find a weakness, a way in. I don't move, even when my Back is angry, even when my Axe Arm shakes I stay still. Thirty-nine minutes nineteen seconds ready to kill or die. It goes around the back, near the Window, and I'm glad I covered it up with the Silvery Tape. Then it goes underneath and even comes right under my Feet. My Body hurts but I won't let it rest or make a sound.

One more shake of the Doorknob, then it retreats into the Wood.

I stay awake the rest of the day, sitting on the Bunk-bed with the Axe on my Legs. It would be wrong to sleep now, the Trailer in danger. It could still be out there, watching, seeing if I come out to look for what was making the noise. I don't want to think about it, but I know what made the noise.

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At night I go Outside, so nervous I almost drop the Axe but I look all around the Trailer and everything looks good, no holes, nothing broken, and I'm hungry so I go back Inside and eat and check the Silvery Tape and wind the Watch and listen to a Record but it's hard to focus on it. Two hours four minutes before the normal Bed time my Eyes are dizzy so I lay down and fall asleep.

I wake in the morning and this time I'm not confused, I know what woke me, can already hear it starting again. Something trying the Doorknob and then circling the Trailer and slapping and pushing on it. I stay in the Bunk-bed with the Axe on my chest and I listen. I sway with the Trailer as the curious hands rock it on it's dead wheels.

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On the third morning I'm awake when it starts. The pushing and pulling is angrier this time, more serious, and now I know it won't stop unless I stop it. I decided in the night that if it happened again I would stop it. That's why I pulled the Silvery Tape from

the Door and sat in the Chair with the Axe on my side.

I wait for it to try the Doorknob. I hear it working around, now underneath, now on the side, and when I hear a shuffle at the front I know it's time. I close my Eyes and then open them and I pull the Doorknob fast and rush out and swing the Axe over my Shoulder and it doesn't stop until it hits a Munie in its foot. It cries out in pain, pain I caused it, and I hear myself screaming but it doesn't feel like I'm doing it so I stop. Then the Sun is in my Eyes and its so strong it's hard to see. My Eyes haven't seen the Sun in a long time and it hurts them now, but eight or nine seconds after I can see better so I look down at the Munie I hit with the Axe, see it in the grass, clawing and trying to get away, and I feel good about this but confused by how small this one is. It's been five months twelve days since I saw one but I don't think they can shrink that much that quick. I don't think that's what life is.

I walk around it, keep away from it, watch it crawl. I remember a long time ago in the Real Times being that small. There was a word for it. A name. But that was a Real People name, not a name for Munies, and I don't think Real People names are the same as Munie names, and I shouldn't confuse anything I was with anything they are.

Look at it. Filthy Munie with its pinkish skin and pinkish eyes. Take the Axe, finish it, chop it up. Throw it down the side of the Mountain with all the garbage.

I lift the Axe up with my Axe Hand, both Hands, hold it above my Head. With the Sun on the Munie I can get a good look at it, see it for what it is. A Beast barely covered with rags, worn only to insult the memory of clothes. Munies don't need help staying warm, they are warm, all the time, just by being alive.

Line up your shot. Swing.

I draw a line in my head from the end of the Axe to the front of the Munie's face. I tense, ready to swing. Then I hear it.

"No."

I check the Wood behind me, then to the side, looking for People, Real People who are watching and talking. I would like to see them, yes, that would be good, but not let them Inside. Not in the Trailer, they might let the Bastard Air in with them. But there aren't People, there are only trees in the Wood. I look at the Munie at my Feet, laying in the grass with its dirty fingers stretched out at me.

It's very small, but even a small one can kill. All it takes is one rip in the Suit and the Bastard Air gets in. The Munie opens its dry lips and shows me its pinkish tongue and its grayish teeth. Then a sound comes out.

"No want," it sounds like, but I know it can't be.

"What was that sound," I ask.

Again the same sound, small, like the squeak of a Rat Beast. "No want."

"Is this a trick? Open your mouth." I hold the Axe to its throat. It opens up to let me see, almost as if it understands, but it's important to remember this is a twitch of instinct. There's nothing in there, not a machine or a speaker or anything like that, so I tell it to shut its mouth.

"No trick," it sounds.

"Munies can't talk."

It studies me with its big, pinkish eyes, looking for my weakness, working out how it can kill me. A noise like "Munie" comes out of it.

"That's you. A Munie, a dirty Munie. You can't talk and you can't understand what I say so stop trying to trick me." I return to the Trailer and leave it to bleed, let it finish itself so I can come back and cut it up and throw it out.

"Can talk."

“No you can't. I won't listen to this.” I go Inside and lock the Door and put up the Silvery Tape. Then I lay in the Bunk-bed and I wait.

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It feels like one hour thirty minutes goes by but when I check the Watch I've been in the Bunk-bed for eight minutes nine seconds. I'm trying to go to sleep to let this pass but when my Eyes close I see the face of the Munie taped to my Eyelids. I think about how small it is, but I remember that I don't know anything about Munies or how they grow or how long they live so I can't say anything about that.

I hear it moving out there, making that croak-croak sound the Munies sometimes do. I can't stand to hear it and I'm afraid if it keeps making that sound other Munies might come to see what's happening. They'll find a dying Munie. They'll find me and rip me apart. I take the Silvery Tape off the Door and go Outside and find the small Munie twenty feet from the Trailer. It holds its foot with hands painted in wet, dark filth. It sees me and starts crawling away faster.

“Stop,” I tell it. “I won't kill you but you have to leave here. Go back to the City and don't return. If you return I'll use the Axe on you.” I hold out the Axe. It holds out its foot. “The blood,” I say, and I know it's right. It can't get far leaking like that and I don't want a trail of Munie blood leading up the Mountain to the Door. I don't like that the Munie is right. It's talking to me. I want it out of here, gone, I want to be alone again and not doing this. I should have used the Axe already.

I throw the Silvery Tape in the tall grass next to it. “Wrap the foot.”

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The Munie walks through the Wood, one bare foot and one Silvery foot. I follow it with the Axe and keep ten seconds of steps between us. I have to be sure it leaves and doesn't get lost and come back, or die and attract others. I'm surprised the Silvery Tape worked. I don't doubt the Tape, I doubt the idiot Munie that figured it out, hunched now and smelling at the air, the Bastard Air, like its okay to smell it, let it into the body. Two minutes forty seconds from the ledge, I have to choose: point out the City and turn around, or kill it.

We clear the Wood. Thirty-two seconds from the ledge the Munie stops its limp walk. It turns its bulging eyes on me. “Hunter.”

“That's what you are.”

It sniffs. “Hunter.”

I understand what it means and then I see it: the Beast has returned from the Wood, still hungry and ready to end the fight, thin and bristled and not scared. It comes quickly from the Trees with its fangs shaking in its mouth and its voice yelling in sharp bursts. The Munie puts its dirty arms out and swings them around, makes strange shapes in the air and croak-croaks. The Beast looks confused for three seconds. I wish I could run in those seconds but they aren't enough.

The Munie is much smaller than me but it seems calm, scared but in control. We keep moving the way we were moving but backwards, faces to the Beast. “What do we

do,” I ask. I’m angry I have to ask a Munie anything but I want to live. It doesn’t answer, changes the way its arms move and that makes the Beast charge and attack it, I don’t know why. Then I don’t see it but it takes a sharp tool from its rags and cuts, wounds the Beast’s side as it comes close and then the Beast cries out and falls heavy into the grass. Then it gets to its feet. It snaps at the Munie but the Munie shows off the tool, shows the Beast’s blood to it.

“No want.” Serious face, not scared. The Beast seems to understand this. It backs away and goes into the Wood and we don’t see it anymore and don’t hear it anymore but the Munie doesn’t smile, because Munies don’t smile.

I look behind me and see we’re at the ledge. Beneath are all the Garbage Bags I’ve thrown over onto the Steep, torn open on the sharp rocks and spilling rotten food and mixed with Munie bones.

At the bottom of the Mountain, the City is awake.

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If I squint my Eyes I can see movement down there; tiny figures in the streets, hunting, fighting over the carcasses of Beasts that roam into the City. Munies almost never leave the comfort of the buildings, they stay Inside the nests they make and feed on whatever gets close. That’s why I’m smarter than the Beasts, and smarter than the Munies- I know to stay away from all life.

The small Munie is poking at the Three-Legged Stand that lays in the dirt by the ledge. The Stand still holds the Long Eye I once watched the City with, making sure the City was calm, not coming closer. I would throw the Garbage Bags over and then look through the Long Eye for one, two hours, and return to the Trailer and feel safe. Those were early days, when I thought I might see Real People if I looked long enough.

“Get away from that,” I yell. It jerks, frightened, scurries away. I pick the Stand up and plant it in the earth again, aimed at the City like it was before. The Munie cowers a little distance away, like it should. “This is mine, do you hear? Don’t touch things you don’t understand.”

“No want.”

“Good. You can’t have it.”

This is where I have to decide what to do with the Munie. Kill it or release it. It’s smarter to kill, be done with it, make sure it’s no more danger to me. It can tell others where to find me and I can’t fight off an entire group of them. But I’ve been Outside too long and need to return to the Trailer before the light goes away. These are the colder days when the Sun becomes lazy. The Munies come out less at this time, which is good, less of them to kill, less bodies for the Steep.

I clap my Gloves to get the Munie’s eyes, then point. “You know the way to your nest? The city is there, down the Mountain. You can see it from here.” Still crouched, fingers in the dirt, it comes closer, unsure of my movements. Then it looks out to the City and after five seconds nods its head. “Go and don’t come back. The only thing for you here is my Axe, understand?”

It slowly crawls over the ledge and descends the Steep, past the Garbage Bags and Cans infested with Winged and Wormy Beasts, past all I’ve done, and when its foot knocks a dry bone loose from the plastic, it looks back up at me like it understands. I look back.

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I haven't used the Long Eye in such a time its a waste not to use it again, once, to try it. I hold it between the Gloves and put the Mask up to the small side and I pick a point far away and look at a group of Trees that have fallen over, one into another. I do this a few times, pick spots and look at them. I happen to find the Munie as it heads down the Mountain so I follow it, watch it descend. Its skills are impressive, even with the Silvery Foot slowing it, and it must be in pain, if Munies feel pain, but it navigates the dangers of the Mountain well. Better for me, let it leave fast and not return so I can forget it. The Munie leaves my sight a few times, hidden by the Trees, but it always shows again, and this happens for some minutes, and the last time it does it's entering into the border of the City, crouched low to the concrete.

I leave the Long Eye to return to the Trailer, and I'm happy about this, but as I walk the Wood there's a picture taped to my Eyes. The small Munie had a strange look on its face when I told it to return to its nest, like it wasn't sure, or it didn't want to, or something like that but I don't know how to read a Munie if there's anything to read. After twenty-six seconds I go back to the Long Eye because I feel I need to know.

I find the small Munie quick enough. With the Sun falling asleep it's the only thing down there sneaking through the cursed streets, and I feel safer Out here seeing this. Time for the Munies to release their grip on the day and give it back over to me, and my Records, and my Watch, and my-

Wait. Something else is moving in the City, something in a doorway. I see it now, a Munie, full size and disgusting like the others, and it moves toward the small one with purpose. Maybe it's family? What am I saying. Munie's don't have families, I can't think of them like Real People.

The small one sees the big one and I can tell this isn't family, isn't friend, the way it backs away and tries to run, and I'm frightened by how fast the big one is when it chases after the small one, catches it, falls on it, and the small one kicks and hits but its too small and too weak. The big one is so much bigger and its acts are brutal. Then the big one drags the small one away by its foot, the Silvery foot, and I see it sniff at the foot and smell the blood under the wrap. I've seen that look on a Munie too many times, that hungry look, that terrible look.

It drags the small Munie back to the door it came out of, a door in a building with a tall, pointy roof. Real People used to go into those buildings to talk to the god when the god was alive. The big one goes inside, then the small one dragged behind it, scratching at the ground with its dirty fingers.

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I return to the Trailer, finally.

This was the longest I've been Outside in a very long time, ever since I found all the Supplies in that building. It was a safe building, had a fence around it with sharp metal at the top, but it was too close to the city so I knew it would always be in danger, always be sniffed and pushed at by the Munies, so I took all I could carry and brought it up and hid

it in the Cavern, and I did this up and down the Mountain until there was no more to take, and I've lived on those Supplies since that night.

I sit on the Chair, fall into it, tired and dizzy. I feel like sleep but it's dark out now and that means I have jobs to do, with the Silvery Tape and the Watch, and before any of that I have to shower, yes, have to do that, have to get clean. I stand when I feel better.

Take the Silvery Tape off the Shower Door. Get in. Put the Silvery Tape on. Take the Suit off. Scrub.

As the cold Alcohol touches my Skin I think of the way the small Munie fought off the Beast by the ledge of the Steep. I could see how scared it was by looking in its eyes. I didn't think Munies could be scared, but the Eyes don't lie, not about these things. That didn't stop the Munie from doing what it had to do, what it needed to so it could stay alive. I know what that's like, know it very well, the way of eating the fear and pushing it down into the Stomach where it can't be seen. I know it, and I guess that Munie knows it. Both of us know, but only the Munie moved.

I finish the shower and dry with the Towel. Then I put the Night Eyes on my Face and turn them on, then put the Mask on, then the Suit, and I leave the Shower and go out the Door, into the Outside.

What are you doing?

Before I know it I'm walking through the Wood, then down the Mountain, going to the City with the Axe in my Axe Hand.

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It's all rust, the Bridge, another way into the City. It's safer to go around, not follow the small Munie's trail which smells like foot blood to the others, and it wouldn't be smart to walk where they wander, excited, looking for food, sniffing in the dirt. They should all be asleep now, yes, curled in their nests of rock and rotted fur, but I don't live by what Munie's should or shouldn't do. Munies are Beasts and Beasts can't be understood.

Stay low. Stay quiet. Learn from the Munies, they get some things right.

I cross into the City for the first time in two years one month seventeen days. The last time I risked this danger was to find Supplies, being hungry, tired of living off Tree Beasts I caught, chewing on bitter plants, and I got hurt trying to travel further from the City, got attacked for it. It was a mistake to enter or escape the City then, it's a mistake now.

The City is dark and quiet, green under Night Eyes, but green without them with all the plants growing in the streets, pushing out from cracks and snaking up walls and crawling in windows. Trees have burst from their dirt boxes and attacked cars. Tree Beasts too stupid to leave the City hide up in the leaves, peaking out now, knowing like me the nights are the safest, safest but never safe, and they watch me, watch one stupider than them, and I don't need Tree Beasts to tell me that.

Walk around the bones. Don't look at them. Don't try to read them, figure out what they used to be.

It's very different looking at the City through the Long Eye from walking through it, first is the smell, the smell that enters even through the Mask Mouth, and I trust the Mask Mouth to stop the Bastard Air but I still try to breathe lighter, don't take in too much of it. After the smell is the size. The tall buildings, the very tall ones, they stand like Beasts of sharp angles, feels like they look down and watch, the way the Trees in the Wood feel,

and it's worse that they hold Munies in their dead bellies.

A sound of danger explodes behind my head and I panic and my chest feels like it will burst, and I turn and find a group of Leatherwings flying out of a big, long car and away, a bus is the name, I think. They flap-flap away into the night, hunting smaller Winged Beasts. I scared them, and they scared me, and I feel better that it wasn't a Munie but I fear the sound may have woken some up.

Relax. Listen. Move. Study the buildings and find your way through.

I find the nest I'm looking for.

**

Back in the Real Times I had a mother. This isn't a surprise because everything has a mother, that's what life is, but I don't think of her now, not because I can't remember her or because I don't like her, but because I do remember her and I do like her, and to think of those things, the Real Times, makes everything worse. My mother is why I'm alive now. Not just the birth but after that, too, when the Bastard Air came, and what she did, and I don't like to think about that, what she had to do.

My mother, I think of her now because she said something. She said, "Remember what you're lucky to have, always. But remember them most especially on the bad days, the days when they're all you have." I'm thankful for this Axe. I'm thankful for this Mask and this Suit. I'm thankful that Munies don't close doors, they ignore them, so that I could walk in here quiet and not wake them, let them stay Inside their noisy sleep.

I stand by the door and I listen to the nest. Breathing from all the walls. Long chairs fill the middle of the room, long enough for ten people to sit on but most of them have been knocked over and pushed in and broken up to make a circle on the ground. All the way at the other side there's a higher part of the room and a window behind it, a very large window made of all the colors I've ever seen, and out of those colors a picture, a picture of the god, I think, but I'm not sure because I've never seen it or met it.

Walk. Stay quiet. Keep the Axe up. Breathe like you're not breathing.

Munies sleep in the corners. I count three, huddled in piles of garbage and kill. I think they do this to show the others what they can do, to show they should be left alone, not attacked, but I'll never really know why a Munie does anything, not really, and not now. I leave them alone and go to the middle, to the long chairs, where I know I'll find them.

The two lay Inside the circle of long chairs, the small Munie tucked under the arm of the big one, both sleeping, and now I know it's true, what I believed. The large one is the largest of the group. Not the leader, Munies don't believe in leaders any more than they believe in anything, but they do fear the largest and give it room and let it take what it wants. Tonight it wanted the small one- for warmth now, for food tomorrow. The Munies, they've always disgusted me, they always will. I think the god wouldn't like what sleeps in its place, but I don't know. Again, I've never met it.

With the Axe I push at the chest of the small Munie, careful, not touching the big one. After a few pushes its eyes open and look around, and then it sees me and I put my Glove out to tell it to be quiet. It understands, and I'm thankful for this too, so I walk around the long chairs trying not to make a sound, no crinkling of the Suit, until I'm above the head of the large Munie and its fat lips croaking Bastard Air.

Lift the Axe with your Axe Hand. Line up your shot. Swing.

The small Munie moves away from the big one, waking it up with a sudden opening of its eyes. A second later I cut its neck in half with the blade of the Axe, the ugly head and ugly body two different things, instant, the Munie dead but the sound loud, dull and wet, the dark blood a mist on the long chairs and the small Munie and the Suit, which I don't like. And in the corners I see the others, and they're awake.

**

We have thirty seconds to one minute on our side. Before anything, before hunger or anger, they'll fight over who's the biggest of them now, who gets the better nest with the dead Munie in it, which they'll sleep on top of to be sure of their safety. I know this as the Keeper of the Time, and from watching them, knowing them as much as anyone can know them. I use these seconds to grab the arm of the small Munie and pull it over the long chairs so we can go out into the night, away from the nest and into the City.

I let go of the small Munie's arm and we run through the street and through the Wood that's grown in it. Already I hear the others behind us, chasing, faster than us, hungrier than us, angrier than us, and I know we don't have time, not enough time to get out of the City, and even if we did it would only get us killed outside the City. This is why I'm not trying to get out of the City.

I lead the small Munie to the stairs that sink into the ground. We go down to the place where the trains hide under the water, where they used to move free with Real People Inside them. The small Munie stops like I knew it would and I grab its arm again, pull it, drag the Munie behind me with the sound of the others coming close, and I walk down into the water.

"No want," the small Munie says.

"No choice."

The small Munie fights me because it hates water. All Munies hate water, they're scared of it. I would live in water to be safe from the Munies if I could, but it's not safe for other reasons, has too many things hiding in it, too much I don't want to think about, but it's safer in the water than out there with the Munies because one scratch would let the Bastard Air in and I can't let that happen, not now, not after all this time. Filled with bad things, these tunnels, but behind us is worse.

I hold onto the small Munie and make my way in, right away floating from the Air in the suit, and I keep the Mask Mouth pointed up and my back to the water, my face in the inches between the water and the brick at the top, covered with slime and dripping on the Mask. The small Munie does its best to do the same, but it shakes and swallows water, coughs it out, swallows more. I wave the other Glove and kick at the water to make us move. It's slow but it works, and the Mask fogs up from the water and from my fast breaths and I try not to think of the Beasts that live in here, under us, their teeth, their tails, their cold eyes that see through the water, the Beasts that live in the trains.

The Axe. You dropped the Axe.

After a long distance, how much I can't see or tell or know, we get between two cars of a drowned train and kick over to the other side. Small bits of light begin to come through the Mask, dim light from the Moon, and I know we're close to the other stairs, the up stairs. I can't hear the small Munie anymore, don't know if it's alive, but I can't do anything but kick and wave and pull it along.

We reach the stairs and I claw at the wall with my Gloves until my feet can touch the

ground, walk on it. Its hard but I use the stairs, strain and come up from the dark water. I pull the Munie out, drag its small body up three stairs. When we're clear and onto dry ground, I'm surprised to hear it cough.

**

We leave the City, head up into the Mountain. I have no Axe and I know the Munies aren't far behind us. We're tired but we climb, using the Trees to hold onto as the Beasts in the leaves shout at us, shout from the grass, shout from the sky, and our breaths, too, shout from our lungs.

When we reach the Steep and trip through the garbage, I push the small Munie over the ledge and climb over. I look through the Long Eye and see what I thought I'd see but wished I wouldn't- the Munies, blindly tracking us up the Mountain, sniffing the Trees, crashing into them, sniffing again and crashing again. Their bad eyes are why we're alive. The small one looks up at me with those same bad eyes, that squeezed face. I look back into them, like if I look long enough I'll understand why I've done this.

I lead us the rest of the way up and the small one stops when it's able to make out the Trailer in front of us. It points and says, "Inside? Want inside?"

"We can't. The Munies will find us, no, we can't go in there."

"Munie."

"This way, through the Wood, come this way."

We take the small Trail through the Wood faster than I've ever taken it, even dragging the small one. I check the Watch to see how quick but find it broken, ruined, stopped by the dark water. I only have a second to be sad for it, for the time and for the job I failed. I didn't keep the time. It's lost forever now.

We enter the Cavern as the sound of the Munies ripping into the Trailer with their claws hits us from behind.

**

I can see Inside the Cavern with the Night Eyes but the small one can't, so it keeps its fingers tight on the folds of the Suit Leg, follows my steps as I make them. Moving this way, awkward, careful not to rip the Suit, I lead us down the slippery stairs and into the lower part of the Cavern where the stream spits and bubbles past.

"Water, hear water."

"Yes, we're not close, we won't fall in." I try to calm it but its eyes are wide and its chest rises and falls so quick I think it might go black at the eyes and fall down to the rock and hit its head. I do the only thing I can think of, what my mother used to do, which was to touch my face, and even though I doubt it will work it does, so we move again.

We reach the Yellow Room and hide in with the Supplies, sit between some of the boxes. The small one comes in close and holds at my Ribs, and at first I try to move away, my instinct to move from the Munies, but then I see it won't hurt me, and so I don't move.

From the mouth of the Cavern above us comes the sound, the one I was afraid we'd

hear, the croak-croak sound. The small one is scared again and touching its face does nothing to quiet it down, I know if I don't quiet the small one soon, they'll find us.

"Quiet. Please be quiet, they'll hear."

I think of my mother again, what she would do to calm me down. The thing that worked was always a story. So I tell the small one a story.

**

The last story my mother told me was about a world made out of sand. It was a great land of deadly Sun where people once lived among the great, flaming hills. These people who lived in the hills, they made buildings, great, big buildings right there in the sand which they built out of respect to their leaders. They would shape them like triangles sometimes, with great, big points pointing to the Sun, and they would build these places to put to bed these leaders they loved so much.

And so other people, years and years and years later, would find these buildings, find them in the sand, and they would open them up to see the leaders inside because they were curious to meet them and all the things they slept with. They would come from very far away to meet them, but also to take the things the leaders slept with, which isn't a nice thing to do but it was in their nature to do it.

As the story goes, these people found another building in the sand, years after all the other ones, when they thought there were no more to find, because this one was hidden far below the sand. They were very happy and very excited to find it, and like they always did, they opened it. But what they found was more than a leader and its things. It was an invisible Beast.

The Beast ran at them through the Air, in the Air, going from one person to the other, to the other, then to other lands and to other lands after that until it was in all the lands and attacking all the people. It attacked them, yes, and many of them fell, fell and never got back up. But some of these people didn't fall, and the ones who didn't fall, they changed. They became like Beasts themselves, but not like the one hiding in that building in the sand. These were Beasts that could be seen, Beasts made from the people who didn't fall, who didn't sleep, who were what people called Mune to the attack of the Beast in the Air, Mune to the Bastard Air.

The lands, the times, they were changed after that. Changed forever, as if nothing was real anymore.

**

The small one holds tight, its arms and legs shaking against the Suit. Funny how I want nothing more than to help it be still, more than even hiding from the Munies who make those noises above. I understand that its scared of the black around us so I go into a box and take out a Stick Light, the ones I used to use before I realized not to, and I snap it between my Gloves and it lights up between us.

I sit again. "That story. Haven't thought of it in a long time. My mother, she told it to me."

"Mother?"

It was the last thing she told me before she took off the suit. I begged her not to, but she took it off and put it on me and said I'd grow into it, I'd grow into it, and I had to go now, and then she left and I didn't see her after, only heard her Inside me, heard her Inside.

The small one touches the Mask, curious like the people in the story, to see what's Inside, but then it jumps when a loud noise comes from above us, from Inside the Cavern, a crash against a spike in the floor and then a blind slap down to the rock. Then it begins to cry, really cry, and as I watch it I know the name, that name I thought of before, it's as true for the Munie as it was for me.

“Child,” I say, and it sounds hollow Inside the Mask.

Calm the Munie down. Keep it quiet, any way you can.

I release the clips around the neck, hear the s-sss of the Air coming in. I take the Mask off and lay it on the rock next to me, feel the cold on my face, smell the moist plant smell of the Cavern. I take the small one's fingers, warm like fever, and put them to my cheek. She stops crying when her skin touches skin.

She looks up and sees my face. Sees my eyes for the first time.

“Mother?”

“We used to say Woman.”

I hold the Light in the Light Hand, the small one in the other, and we listen to the Munies coming to us, slapping and stumbling and clawing through the black. Without the Trailer, without the Mask, without the Watch there's only the waiting, the waiting to see what comes first- the Munies, or the Death, or the Change.

