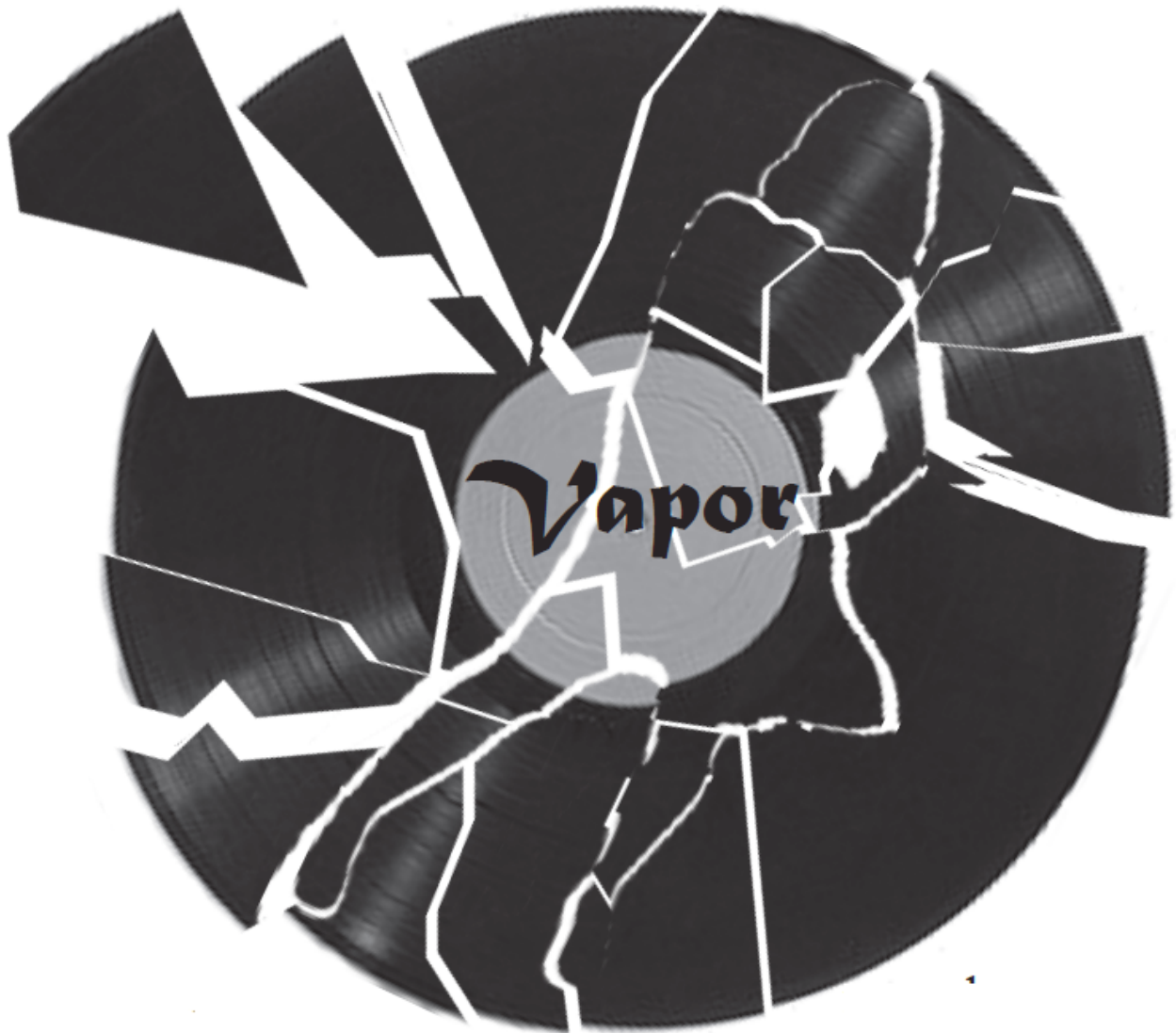


2014 FENCON SHORT STORY CONTEST WINNER

by David W. Lee

I was sifting through the ruins for old records when he came.

Most of the records were still in their sleeves, which didn't make it any easier to find the ones that hadn't been cracked or broken into pieces. Intact records were a shrinking rarity, it seemed, but without electricity, they were the only way for me to listen to music. So finding and collecting the last physical records in the city had become a pet hobby of mine. Though I wasn't

picky, I didn't care for anything instrumental – jazz, classical, that digital experimental stuff. I wanted anything with lots of singing or rapping. When I played them, the rooms would fill with human voices, echoing off the walls like ghosts. At the worst, it was something to pass the time. At best, it was sumptuous and lovely; it could warm the void in the world.

I was hunched over a pile of old country albums when I saw movement out of the corner of my eye. I looked up to see a blurry shadow through the storefront windows, thickly fogged with decades of dust. Whatever it was, it was too tall to be a wolf dog, and it moved slowly and deliberately. I kept a ballpeen hammer with me most times I ventured out into the ruins, and now I drew it close, clutched it with both hands as I eased up next to the entrance and squeezed the door open just so.

Unbeknownst to me, the bell attached to the door still worked. It was an old-fashioned brass bell, I suppose for an old fashioned sort of store, and somehow rust and grime hadn't hardened the clapper into place and the sudden ding shattered the silence in the air. The figure turned around – and I froze in place when I recognized what it was.

Not a what – but a who. Another person.

After Emma, it had been decades, by my best guess, since I'd seen another human, or at least one who wasn't peeling off the side of billboard or preserved within a glass picture frame. I didn't care much for keeping track of time anymore. The seasons still came and went, and by them I had a sense of when a year had passed, but I'd long ago run out of fingers and toes to count the years themselves, and it had seemed, in the beginning, too desperate to carve tallies into the door jambs and signposts that I passed by. Besides, we never stayed that long in one room, or even one building.

The man stood before me and looked as surprised to see me as I was to see him. He had long, graying hair that fell to his shoulders in waves and a coarsely shorn beard, the color of mud patched with white. His dark eyes peered out at me, like black pearls, from behind his overgrown jungle of a face, and though I knew I should be suspicious or even frightened of this man, I wasn't. Maybe I'd forgotten how. Maybe I no longer understood that distrust and aversion had once been the key to my survival. Maybe I'd forgotten how people could be.

"Are you alone?" he asked. The words came in a whisper, accompanied by darting eyes, a low hunch, and I realized he had more reason to be afraid than me. This was my city, after all, and I could just as easily disappear among the winding streets or lead him to a trap. His palms were out, open and empty, and I still had the hammer in one fist, in plain sight. I clenched it for reassurance.

"Yes," I said. And it was true – here at least. I wasn't about to tell him about Emma, but even if I did, I didn't know where she was right now. Off scrounging, as she'd announced to me this morning before disappearing down the stairwell. I figured I wouldn't see her until sundown, as usual.

"Would you mind putting that hammer away?"

"It's just a hammer."

"I don't have a hammer."

"You're right. I don't know *what* you've got in that pack of yours." He had on a large, worn, olive camper's pack that peeked out from behind his shoulders. His coat was a thick, padded brown, ripping at the seams, too warm for the end of summer weather we had. I could

certainly believe he'd been traveling for a long time.

"I don't mean you any harm."

"Is what every ill-intentioned person in the world says right before they do something terrible," I responded. So I hadn't forgotten, after all. I'd just needed a moment to remember. I had Emma to thank for keeping me sharp.

The man slowly slid his pack off of his shoulders and placed it on the ground next to his feet. He wore dark, scuffed boots with laces tied in indecipherable knots.

"I'd like for us to be able to trust each other," he said. "I know that takes time. But maybe let's start with a name. I'm Daniel."

I shrugged and replied, "Abernathy."

"Excuse me?"

"Abernathy. That's my name. For now. We figured that since there's no one else, names don't really matter anymore, right? I like to change mine up from time to time. In fact, I was 'Daniel' for a while."

"We?"

"Shit." Not so sharp, after all.

"It's okay," he said, holding his hands up once more, a gentle pleading in his voice. "That's good news. The more people the better. I've been walking the country, looking for those who are left. There are so few of us that each person I come across is a treasure. I want to help."

“Help how?”

“We have a caravan camped just outside of town. I came alone because I didn’t want to scare anybody. I’ve been walking the continent, looking for . . . well, I don’t want to call us survivors. We’re just people, right? There are six of us in total – me, and five in the camp. I tell everybody I meet that I think it’s time we stopped living in fear and isolation and started working together again. The place I’m from, it’s a community out west. Nearly thirty strong, and I’m hoping to see a few more by the time I get back. I don’t doubt you’ve figured out how to live out here, seeing as how you’ve survived this long. But there’s more to life than just surviving. More importantly, you don’t have to do it alone.”

“I’m not alone, remember?”

“I’ve told you how many are in my party. Would you at least repay that kindness?”

I considered it for a moment, allowing my grip on the hammer to relax. If I lied to him, told him I had a large group with me, he’d either get scared off or, more likely, grow only more insistent on meeting everyone. And then what? I didn’t want him pressing, but I also didn’t want him gone, not yet. I decided to tell him the truth.

“There are two of us.”

A soft smile rose on the corners of his mouth. “What’s her name?”

“How’d you know it’s a woman?”

“The way you’re protective of her. Old habits die hard, don’t they? You don’t really appreciate all the stupid old rules and traditions until there’s nothing left of them anymore. Plus, I figured I had a fifty-fifty shot at worst.”

“Her name’s Emma.”

“Today it is, at least. Which is why you don’t mind telling me.”

“Yeah.”

“You think I could meet her? Once you feel comfortable, that is. I imagine you’d want her input before you’d be ready to make a decision.”

The truth was, I’d felt something awaken within me when this man, this Daniel, told me there were more people in the world. I’d always wished there were more survivors, but I had Emma, and I had come to terms with the idea that she was all that was left, and with time whatever loneliness she could not quench had sunk into a low, constant throb, a slowly fading scar. Emma equated hope with expectation, which she viewed as the opposite of freedom. For as long as I could remember, she hadn’t seemed so far off. But now, whatever I had buried long ago had become rekindled, and dare I say I had become *excited*, not just at the sight of Daniel himself, but of the promises he spoke of. I still wasn’t sure if I believed him or not, but I knew I wanted to. And I wanted Emma to as well.

“I think that could be arranged,” I said. “But I’d like to check your bag, first, make sure everything is safe.”

“Of course,” Daniel said. “It’s the sensible thing to do.” He pushed the backpack toward me, managed to slide it halfway between us. “But in kind, I’d really like for you to put away the hammer.”

I slid the hammer into my belt loop and approached the bag. It wasn’t much different than the camping satchels you could find lining the walls of any sporting goods store, crossed with a

multitude of zippers, straps, and hidden pouches. I stuck my hand in the largest compartment and rooted around, feeling mostly clothes, a few pots and pans, a book. A lantern, bedroll, and canteen were attached to the outside of the pack, and I decided that by now I would have felt anything large enough to be dangerous.

“Okay,” I said, returning the pack to Daniel. “Come with me.”

Emma and I were currently staying at the Magistrate hotel, a stately, once-handsome place of rich mahogany paneling and marble floors that had since gone to pale, cracked decay. It was still nicer than sleeping in, say, a partially collapsed house infested with mold and rats. The Magistrate resided in a steel and concrete building, tall and broad, sturdy and safe; it seemed like something that might last as long as we would.

I had no intention of bringing Daniel to our room or even telling him what floor we were on, not yet. But it would be getting dark soon, and he could stay in the chain hotel across the street, for the time being. I would bring Emma to meet him in the morning.

“How long has it been just the two of you?” Daniel asked. We moved through a motionless river of broken, rusting cars, wading through the middle of the street with one lane between us. We remained abreast, so that one of us would always be in sight of the other.

“I’m not sure. There were a few years, at first, when it was just me, when I thought the entire city was abandoned. It got pretty bad, as you might imagine, but then, one cloudy afternoon, she appeared, right in the middle of the street like we are now, just staring at me. She’d been alone all this time, too, and we were so happy to have found each other. We’ve been together ever since. To answer your question, I’ve kind of lost track of time, really. Do *you* know how long it’s been since the collapse?”

“A hundred and twelve years,” Daniel said.

I was taken aback. It had felt like a few decades at most. Had my sense of time become that distorted? What kind of void had I been living in, what cloud of fog had I disappeared into?

Emma and I had always encouraged each other in our accepted, mutual nihilism. It was freeing, to not care about structure and order in a world that seemed in dire shortage of both things, and in each other we'd found a way of accepting, of letting go, that I don't think would have been possible if we'd remained alone. Hope could also be a source of pain, and when it served no other purpose, we no longer saw the need for it. We weren't always happy, but we endured.

“You're not messing with me?”

“Why would I? That would be cruel, and I don't wish to be cruel.”

“I had no idea.”

“You're not the first one. I've met a few people on my travels who see the calendar as an obsolete piece of technology. Time feels as though it's passing slower if you're counting the seconds, the hours, the years. If it's not functional, then why burden yourself with it?”

“That's how we felt,” I said.

“But then you have to ask yourself if that's what you really want. To drift through your days until what, the oceans dry up? The sun explodes?”

“And if I join you, time will have meaning again?”

“Maybe. Our community is a fairly new one, as far as 'new' has any real meaning

anymore. We're still figuring out what our purpose is, but we can agree on one thing: we *want* purpose. I won't promise you that we're working toward a cure to repopulate our sorry world – we don't have a doctor or biologist among us, unfortunately – but perhaps one day we might. There are many of us who believe a new generation is the key. If we know more people will one day walk the earth, maybe some of us, eventually, will be able to let go.”

“I don't think it's a very compelling offer if you're asking me to come with you so I can learn how to die.” We'd arrived at the intersection just before the Magistrate. I stopped and turned to face him.

“In a hundred and twelve years, you've never thought about it?” Daniel asked.

I had. Even after I'd met Emma, there were a few times when I'd looked down from our twentieth story rooftop and thought about hurling myself onto the broken concrete below. Daniel seemed to understand this simply by looking at me.

“Look, it's getting late,” I said. “I think Emma would be more receptive of you if we met in the morning. You can stay in that building” – I pointed to the salmon-colored hotel across the street – “and we'll see you for breakfast just past sunup, okay?”

“I understand.” His voice was so gentle that it unnerved me. In the advancing twilight, his white-flecked hair took on a glowing, spectral quality, and I wondered, for a moment, if tomorrow morning he'd be nowhere to be found. “Good night, Abernathy. I'm glad to have met you.”

“You too, Daniel.”

I climbed the stairs up to the eighteenth floor alone, feeling curiosity take hold of me. The

more I thought about Daniel, the more I wanted to know about him and his people. I wanted to know what kind of people had managed to survive, if there was a pattern. I hadn't had time to look for any kind of pattern in the chaos of the collapse or the ensuing months I spent hiding from the last few people in the city, waiting for them to die out, most of them succumbing to their tumors in the middle of the streets, desperate and clawing at pitiless, smooth car doors, gasping their final breaths.

If they had found me, I would have been sliced open, torn apart in search of a cure, my blood drained in an attempt to replace the poison flowing through their own veins. In the after, I'd discovered that they had tried everything I could have imagined, and far worse, on others like me and none of it had worked. For a long time after that, I yoked myself to my guilt and wondered incessantly if I might have been able to make a difference. If only I hadn't been such a coward, then maybe I wouldn't be so totally alone in this city. If only I could have saved someone else who was like me.

And just when I thought I couldn't stand it any longer, I found her, hazy through the warm summer air, in her oblivious red blouse, her chestnut-colored hair draped all around her. She who'd really taught me to let go.

I entered our suite to complete silence; she must not have come back yet. The room was dusty and dim – what little light remained in the day could only creep in through the sides of the curtains, and I preferred them to remain drawn. I wanted to trust Daniel, but there was no sense in exposing us to undue risk.

I realized that I had not returned with a single record and, in a moment of mock despair and real exhaustion, I collapsed face first into the sofa.

It was dark by the time she returned. I wasn't asleep and could hear her shuffling, so I opened my eyes to greet her at the door. Even in the pale, silver moonlight, I could see her pretty clearly. Her face was dirt-streaked and ruddy, her eyes distant and tired. Her shirt had been ripped near the waist – it seemed new, at least – and her jeans were cuffed to reveal dark ankles.

“How'd it go?” I asked.

She held up her backpack and I heard glass bottles clinking against each other. Success.

Emma set the bag on the floor and produced two bottles of lightly colored whiskey. She twisted the cap off of one of them, labeled *Bison Creek*, and poured us each a glass.

“Tough run?” I asked. She had been out longer than me, after all. It had always struck me as odd to know that alcohol was in scarcer supply than the canned food that had become our mainstay for sustenance. How the need to dull pain had become *the* overwhelming priority. How hopeless and painful that must have been for them, to have made immediate relief more important than survival.

“It was a good workout,” she said. She brushed my legs off the couch and plopped down next to me, rubbing her calves. “Especially those last few flights of stairs. So, what's for dinner?”

“Anchovies?”

“No.”

“Sardines?”

“No. Anything that's not fish?”

“Sorry.”

“Do we have any mackerel?”

“I saw some at the Shop Rite the other day, I think,” I said. “I’ll pick some up on the next trip.”

“Did you find any good records?”

“Not really. Something’s . . . come up.”

“Oh yeah?” She sipped on her whiskey and peered straight at me through her bangs, her pale blue eyes shimmering in the dark, as though lit from within.

I spoke slowly so as not to startle her, even though I knew she’d always been the unflappable one, the calm, fearless one. My courage.

“I saw someone today. A person, I mean. A real person, a man.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Is it? He said he came from this settlement on the west coast. He was traveling the country, looking for people like us. He wants to meet you tomorrow morning.”

The way she glared at me, brow-crooked, eyes cold and piercing, made me aware of the smile that had crept across my face. I dropped the grin and sat straight up, cross-legged, facing her.

“Emma, we’re not alone in the world. That’s good news.”

“How many?” she asked.

“Six on this journey, including him. Maybe thirty in all, back where he comes from. He

asked if we would consider joining them.”

“And you told him to fuck off, right?”

“No,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck. “I said I’d talk to you about it. So here I am, talking to you.”

“Ab, we don’t know anything about this guy, or his ‘people.’ Has it been so long that you’ve forgotten what it was like when everyone was trying to kill us?”

“I think this guy’s different. He’s like us. He’s a survivor. Whatever happened to us must have happened to him too.”

“That doesn’t mean his intentions are good.” She matched my pose, first sitting up and then leaning forward, her forehead inches away from mine. She reached out her hand and ran her fingers down my cheek. In the darkness, the world had shrunk down to just this space between us, as it had so many times before. “I like what we have here,” Emma said quietly. “I like us. I don’t think we should risk what we have for something that, honestly, I don’t think concerns us one bit.”

“You’re right,” I said. “As long as we’re with each other, nothing else matters.”

I felt her smile at me.

“Which is why I want us to make this trip together,” I continued.

She pulled back from me, more sad than angry. “It sounds like you’ve already made up your mind.”

“No,” I said. “What you think is important to me.”

“Well, it’s hard for me to argue against the idea when I haven’t met the guy.”

“And that’s why I want you to talk to him tomorrow. Come down to the plaza with me. We’ll start a fire, brew some coffee, and just have a conversation in broad daylight. I don’t think I’d forgive myself if I didn’t at least give him an opportunity to tell us more of his story.” She knew, I think, that I meant I would hold it against her. And maybe that was true. “We haven’t had to think the worst of things in a long time, Emma. We know this city forwards and backwards, we have nothing to be afraid of as long as we’re on our own turf. I want you to be able to give him a chance.”

“When you put it that way, how could I say no?” she said. She looked away as she downed the rest of her whiskey, and then she stood up and draped a hand over my shoulder. “I’m going to open some tuna and a can of green beans. You want to split it with me?”

“That’s okay, I’m not really hungry,” I replied. There was a coldness in her hand that hadn’t been there when she’d touched my face before.

“Suit yourself,” she said, and yawned loudly as she sauntered away until I could see the outline of her shadow no more.

The next morning she was already up by the time I awoke. The early dawn had begun to warm the bedroom, chasing away the blue glow of the night. I got dressed and found Emma sitting by the window in the next room. Her hair was pulled back into a taut ponytail and she’d slipped on a woolen, dark red sweater.

“Hey,” I said. I could feel her tightness from across the room.

She turned from looking through the side of the curtains and faced me. “Are you ready?”

I picked up and filled a camp kettle with water, poured some coffee into a press, and threw both into my backpack.

“Here, take this too,” Emma said. She slipped a lock-blade knife into my hand, wrapping my fingers around it. “Just in case.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll be fine,” she said. The certainty in her voice chilled me to the bone.

We descended the stairs and headed up the street for half a block before we reached the crumbling plaza, a recessed circle that had once been paved with pink soapstone. A large, wrought-iron statue of Greek figures, bodies intertwined and long turned green from corrosion, formed a dried-up fountain in the center of the plaza.

We found Daniel sitting calmly on the rim of the fountain, beneath the shadow of the statue. He almost appeared to be meditating.

“Good morning, Daniel,” I said as we approached him. I set my pack down, removed a canister of gel fuel, and lit it on the fountain’s rim. Once the flame had grown, I balanced the kettle on top. The air was still and cool, the whole plaza awash in sunlight reflected off the glass and steel buildings nearby.

Daniel opened his eyes slowly, already familiar with the sound of my voice. He took a deep breath and let out a long, complacent sigh. I admired how he seemed to possess serenity without carelessness. I wanted to learn from him.

“Will our guest be joining us shortly?” he asked.

I looked back at Emma, who had been trailing behind me. Daniel must not have seen her yet. She still looked reticent – shy, even, which I suppose made a certain kind of sense. The last time she’d met a new person it had been me, all those years ago.

“Daniel, this is Emma,” I said. “Emma, this is the man I told you about. See? Nothing to be afraid of.”

“My friend, what are you talking about?” Daniel said. Emma had shuffled up beside me now, trying to appear friendly, for my sake, but Daniel continued looking straight at me without so much as acknowledging her presence.

“Emma, the only other person in this city. The girl I told you about,” I said. I was beginning to feel insulted.

“Abernathy, there’s no one there,” Daniel said. His eyes shrunk, seemed frosted with morning dew.

“Yes, there is!” Emma said. She waved her hand in front of Daniel’s face but elicited no response. “Ab, is your new friend blind or something?”

“All right, Daniel,” I said, attempting a chuckle. “That’s kind of funny, but maybe not the best way to make a first impression.”

“It’s not a joke,” Daniel said. His eyebrows had become knotted with worry. “There’s nobody there.”

“What the hell is your problem, old man?” Emma said. She then turned to me. “What

kind of game is he playing?”

“I don’t know,” I said to Emma. I began backing away from Daniel. I had been so sure that I’d read this man’s intentions correctly yesterday, but now I couldn’t make any sense of what he was up to. “Daniel, you’re saying you don’t see or hear anybody besides me?”

“That’s correct,” Daniel replied.

“Let’s see if he can *feel* something, then.” Emma stepped forward, extending her arm toward him. I couldn’t tell if she meant to grab, slap, or punch him.

“Wait!” I said. I pulled the knife out of my pocket but kept it tucked out of Daniel’s sight. I felt my chest seize with panic again, an overwhelming sense that something was terribly wrong. “I don’t know what’s going on here, but I don’t want you getting any closer to him.”

“I think I’m beginning to understand,” Daniel said. He remained seated against the fountain’s rim, his eyes still locked into mine. “You’ve been alone for a very, very long time. Longer than the human mind can stand, I would expect. But you also have a great capacity for survival. We both do, to be standing in front of each other today. Sometimes the mind does what it must to keep from breaking apart.”

“You’re not going to stand there and let him manipulate you like this, are you?” Emma said. “Of course I’m real. Look at me.”

I turned to her, her face darkened, her back against the sun.

“We’ve been together longer in our lives than we’ve been apart. Feel this.” She grabbed my hand and placed it against her chest. I felt her heartbeat pulse beneath my fingers. “Tell me that’s not real.”

“I can understand how this must be very confusing,” Daniel said. “But I can help you. You don’t have to lie to yourself to escape your loneliness. There’s a place in the world for you, a *real* place where you can belong.”

I turned my attention back to Daniel. What he was saying was ridiculous, of course it was, but the more I tried to push the feeling of panic and dread away, the more it threatened to consume me. And even through the fog of fear and confusion, I knew there was clarity in his words. The kettle had boiled over and began to whistle, a whistle that quickly grew into a scream.

“I can’t believe you’re actually considering what he’s saying,” Emma said. She pulled away from me, full of hurt. “If that’s how easy it is for you to throw away everything we’ve been through together, then go with him for all I fucking care.” Her voice had broken, and she turned from me and started to walk away.

“Emma, wait,” I called after her. As I moved to follow her, I saw Daniel finally rise to his feet. He walked over to the kettle and removed it from the flame. Its shrill cry and blast of steam abated, leaving only silent vapors to trail up languidly toward the sky.

“I know you don’t want to believe me,” Daniel said. “But bring her to our camp. If we all say that we can’t see her, then you’ll know it’s the truth.”

“Or I’ll know you’re all lying, together,” I said. I turned to look at Emma as she continued to walk away, down the sidewalk, clutching her arms and shrinking smaller and smaller with each step. I was certain that if I let her out of my sight, I would never see her again. It was a thought I could not bear.

Daniel saw how I'd become transfixed on her, how I leaned after her, and he said, in a trembling, pleading voice, "There are too few people left in this world for us to continue to live apart. Come with me, please."

"I think there's exactly the right number of people left in the world," I replied, not turning to look him in the eye. "I think you'd better move on." I raised my arm, revealing the knife in my hand, extending the blade. "I don't want to see you again."

Daniel never said another word to me as I turned and set off after Emma, set off to return to the home we'd built together. This was our city, our place, our hard-won life.

A breeze swept through the plaza, clearing away long dead leaves and leaving behind dancing shadows in its wake.