

Marie stepped off the white salt, which crackled quietly under her step, and onto the verge, scuffing up the dry earth. She felt as though she might sneeze and sent finger and thumb up to her nostrils to pinch them. The underside of her nose felt sore, the edges of her nostrils felt flanged with heat. She had sunburnt the underside of her nose again, as so often happened when she was out on the salt. Marie licked her lips, they were salty like her tongue. She needed to drink some fresh water, not the water that trickled through the salt basin, or maybe a beer would be good. Her hand felt for the change in her pocket and jingled it a bit. There should be enough.

She liked the taste of the salt, it had the saltiest salt taste you could imagine, certainly the best she had ever tasted. Better than the sea salt her mother used to use before they emigrated. But Marie knew that she couldn't eat too much of it, even if her body needed it, craved it, called out to her brain for its salt stock to be replenished, even though it tasted so good. It would do of ruer in the end, she knew it. What was it it was called, the name they used to say... borax? Yes, that was it, borax, not good for you they used to say, her mother and father admonishing her, make you feel sick and give you a runny tummy. Headaches and tiredness. Maybe even if you ate a lot of it, her mother told her when she was a little older, it would make you infertile. Well I never did have a kid, she thought, but there could be all sorts of reasons for that. Don't get any sickness any more either, must have got used to it...

Wandering back towards the old ranch she glanced up at the small, puffy white clouds which dotted the clear blue sky and drifted out from behind one ridge of mountains over towards the other. Their tempo seemed to suit the silence. Marie loved the silence, she stopped a moment to listen, so that her footsteps died away and there was nothing but silence, nothing to listen to but silence... — she loved it, always had, ever since they had first come here. She stood thinking about how she would run around as a little girl, tiring herself out in the summer heat, that excessive heat, her mother and father drawing her into the shade and making her drink plenty of water... they were good parents... hard-working and loving, always doting on her...

The silence was everywhere, all around her, in the air, in the mountains, she had always felt drawn by the way it sealed off the valley from the rest of the world, as though there were an invisible ceiling of air level with the ridge tops of the two valley sides, and the weight of the valley's air sealed it off, hot, heavy. She could feel it bearing down on her, the air, and made herself move on towards the old shop, so lonely now, shuttered up, but there was nothing else for it. Now that disaster had befallen it was a good thing that the valley was sealed off from the outside world. There was just that trickle of water coming on from beyond the top end of the valley, nothing to speak of, it never flooded any more, at least it hadn't for many years now, Marie considered, and she took it to be a sign that everything had changed out there beyond the mountains. Just that trickle of water, and whatever might be in it of poisonous chemicals or radiation, she reckoned, got done for by the saltiness of the place — once bad water always bad water. She was sure that the salt content would neutralise or kill off anything, borax or no borax, and better than salt she knew than the all sorts of things she didn't.

Her head was beginning to thump, the heat she thought, she really needed that beer. Then there was the matter of the road, sometimes someone would come in to the valley from one end or the other, carrying god knows what, the last survivors looking for somewhere new maybe, but she had her way of dealing with them. She got to the parking spaces at the front of the old shop, patted a wheel of one of the old borax mining wagons as she turned past them — the metal was scorching hot, she like the feeling of the brief sear through the skin and how it dispersed, tingling.

When she opened the shop door with the key she kept on a piece of twine around her neck, the musty smell and the coolness of the air billowed out into the heat. Inside with the door shut she could really feel the throbbing of her temples. Large motes of dust swayed lazily in the thick air under the old beams. The smell of old wood, the old familiar smell, came through once she had grown accustomed to the mustiness. Behind the counter she opened the antique register and dropped the coins from between her fingers one at a time, her lips moving slightly as she counted. Then she took a bottle of lemonade and popped the ceramic stopper open on its metal fame; she watched the little plume as it smoked out off the rim of the glass neck and listened carefully to the rattling of the bubbles down in the bottle. Then she put it to her mouth and cast her head back, taking pleasure in the cool liquid and the popping of the bubbles in her throat.

The feeling of the bubbles tickling inside her made her think of drinking cans of soft drinks as child. Before they emigrated, long ago when her parents were still alive, before even her parents had lived half their lives and had any idea of how their lives would develop. Before they came to this deep, scorching cleft in the landscape and ran the shop. The feeling of the bubbles put her right back in her childhood, wandering along quiet roads in the sun, drinking cans of soft drinks, wandering with her parents on the dry grass in front of the triumphal arch at Glanum, with the remains of the settlement on the other side of the road, the Via Domitia. That had always struck her, that the little triumphal arch remained standing, small but proud — now that she thought of it again: slightly silly, being so small, but of course she realised she hadn't thought that then. What had struck her then was that the arch was standing there, but on the other side of the road the town, the old houses and other buildings in the form of low walls, were in some places little more than outlines of the ground plans, odd columns still sticking up — the triumphal arch and the mausoleum had remained standing there on the other side of the road, triumphing over nothing, while the remains of the actual town, the dwellings of the townspeople, were all broken down... and just down the road and tucked in behind was the lunatic asylum in the monastery where Van Gogh painted...

Marie drained the bottle and felt her headache subside a little. It was a very long time since anyone but her had been inside the shop. A long time since anyone but her had spent any money there. In what was now her own shop. All the goods were old now but most of them were still edible. She kept check on things, kept things neat and tidy, never took anything without paying for it. She had to honour the way her parents had kept the shop ticking over. She couldn't go ruining what they had managed to build up just because things had changed so much. Now that only a few cars came through the valley, and you couldn't trust the people in them, not after what had happened out there. What exactly had happened she couldn't say, because she seldom ventured beyond the valley and only at night, when the landscape was even more desolate than in the day. But in the

day she never ventured past the wall of rock, the slender basin between the red-blue ranges was the extent of her world. Indeed she was on guard against what might venture into her valley; occasionally people still came driving in their cars, people Marie assumed were on the run from something, escaping whatever it was that had happened. She never stopped to ask, was too much on her guard. She knew that they were too dangerous to approach alive. Just then she heard the crunching of wheels on the dusty gravel outside, a slow crunching, uncertain. She cursed herself for having got herself wrapped up in the lemonade and childhood; she had been caught off her guard, usually she hid in the borax wagons when she saw someone approach far off, and didn't let anyone get beyond them. She felt very at home crouched in the wagons, taking aim like a sniper through a gap between the old boards.

Quickly Marie ducked behind the counter and took hold of her father's old shotgun. She loaded it and came up slowly, turning herself towards the window whilst trying to keep out of view of anyone outside. The car was creeping along the gravel towards the entrance, as though the driver was trying to work out if anyone was there. She ducked down again and around the counter, waddled low like a duck to a spot near the door where there was a gap in the boards that formed the wall. She positioned the barrel and ran her eye down it and followed an imaginary line out into the bright light and sharply defined shapes of midday. The pounding was in her temples again. The bonnet of the car nosed into view, then the windscreen, a wall of reflections in the harsh light, then the driver's window, rolled down so that she had a clear sight of his face looking towards the door, looking almost straight at her had it not been for the boards. She squeezed the trigger. There was a crack louder than the thumping in her head and she saw the man's face explode in a shower of reds. Then came the screaming; a woman in the passenger seat leant over the already limp body of the man, screaming pitifully as the car rolled slowly on and brought her into full view. Marie squeezed the trigger again and there was another crack that deafened the thumping in her head and the screaming had stopped. There was a capacious silence and through the silence the thundering in her head flowered again and stuffed up all the corners of her skull. After some moments she registered that the car had come to a halt; the man's now useless foot must have slipped off the accelerator.

The silence continued to spread into everything except her head, her temples throbbed and pounded. Marie staggered to her feet and almost threw the gun onto the counter, falling onto it herself. She eyed the register narrowly and told herself that the couple in the car were bound to have a few dimes on them. Then she staggered away from the counter and grabbed another bottle of lemonade, popped it open and began to glug from it without thinking to pause and watch it smoke — the fizz got up her nose and made her sneeze. She sneezed hard twice and lost her orientation for a few seconds. Then she stood still and the pounding in her head faded back in and she gazed into the murky recesses of the shop, thinking about how little the triumphal arch was.

Shortly, or later — she couldn't tell — it dawned on Marie that the bottle of lemonade was dangling empty from her hand. She held the neck between finger and thumb, and there it swung infinitesimally, as though nudged by a light breeze. Remembering the couple in the car she let the bottle fall to the floor, where its thick girth thudded dully, and went into the stock room to get her equipment: her mother's washing up gloves, so old that the yellow rubber was faded and cracked;

her father's leather apron, which she kept from cracking too much by applying butter from the shop that had long since turned rancid; and an ancient gas mask the provenance of which had been the source of many family discussions. Marie suited up in her ragbag attire and went outside to the car. First she rifled the couple's pockets, finding the cash she had expected, and plenty of it. Credit cards, ID, and other official bits and bobs were of no interest to her. She took a fancy to the lady's leather jacket, and finding that the bullet had missed it and that it was only a little stained with blood, she decided to take it. On the back seat and in the boot she found a few other items she deemed might come in useful at some point.

Marie stashed the loot behind the counter, out the required amount of money for the second lemonade in the register, and went back out the car. She pushed and shoved the man aside, on top of what had been his wife, and drove the car out to a small canyon among the hills. The last stretch was along a stoney track not designed for vehicles at all, and the bumping and jolting caused the man to roll onto the handbrake, leaving a sludge of half-dried, unguent blood all over it. She had to grapple to release the handbrake again, getting blood all over the old rubber gloves, which would never quite be washed out of the cracks, giving a fine pink grain to the yellow rubber. Marie got out of the car with the handbrake off, left the door open, and let the car trundle over the edge into the small ravine below. She knew the coyotes would be out that night, soon the smell of blood and carcass would be on the air, calling them in for easy pickings. She walked back down into the valley to oil and polish her father's old gun.

By nightfall Marie had taken the gun up to one of the old tourist campsites in the low foothills, along with a heavy jacket. There she sat with her back to the hills as the nightly cold gusts blew down in great walls of air, each gust seeming to last minutes. Four or five of these moving barriers buffeted her until the temperature had dropped and the until then still hot air had suddenly grown cold. She put on the jacket and lay down with the gun next to her, and gazed up at the stars. Most people, she thought, after several minutes of open-mouthed staring, have never seen all the stars, but I can't remember what it's like not to see the black night sky twinkling with a million sources of light, white, yellow, flanged with pale blue or pink. The great out there moving slowly above me, turning as I turn on this globe, a speck to those dots... She began to doze off, the view of the heavens growing hazy as her eyelids drooped.

Later she was awoken, as she had anticipated, by the cries of coyotes in the hills around her. No matter how many times she heard their calls, they always curdled her blood. She lay quite still in her heavy coat, cold in spite of it. The calls seemed so close, and carefully her hand moved, slowly, imperceptibly, to grasp the gun. But the calls always seemed close, it was the echoes and sound sluices of the hills. Grasping the gun firmly she rose to her feet quickly and scanned the darkness around her. She knew the hills even in the dark, had them imprinted in her mind; she made her way as quietly as possible in that echoing stoniness, cat-like, towards the little canyon. Marie liked the clear nights, the grip of the cold air around her forehead seemed to alleviate the pounding that might be left over from the hot, sultry days...

As quietly as she tried to move the stones still rattled away from under her footsteps, the sound bouncing off the rocky walls around her. The landscape announced her presence, just as it had an-



nounced the coyotes to her: she was on a level with them, they a pack with their sharp teeth, she alone with her father's gun. As she moved into the little canyon the crunching of her own steps closed in around her. Everything was close: sounds, sight, bleached in the moonlight. she saw movement ahead, and then sets of eyes turned toward her, pairs of eyes reflecting the moonlight back at her. But other pairs of eyes had done so so many times before. A snarl sounded, as blood-curdling as the calls that had awoken her. Marie levelled the gun, crouched slowly, carefully, taking aim right between a set of shining eyes. Another pair began to come towards her, she could just make out the movement of the legs, the shadowy body. Marie held her aim and squeezed the trigger. The crack resounded excruciatingly loudly in the narrow canyon, made loose stones tumble and roll; the shot cracked back, lower and more distant from more distant rock faces. The pair of eyes she had aimed at had disappeared from the face of the earth, in a blink, swiftly followed by fleet feet rushing away from her, scattering in all directions — or else it was the echoing of the mountains — and pained howls of warning faded in from the deafening silence. Everything died away again. All the sounds died away, only the bleached light of the moon remained. She waited with cocked gun until she was quite sure the silence was complete, all-encompassing.

Marie's legs had begun to hurt from crouching for so long, and she raised herself up and walked gingerly in the line of the shot. She knew the routine well. Roughly where she expected it she found the lifeless body of the coyote. With the gun resting over one arm she dragged the coyote by the tail over the stoney ground, back towards the old camping area. There in the first inkling of dawn, even though it was still freezing cold, she worked with a knife to skin the animal. She hadn't even noticed the cold until she had got back to the campsite, she never did. She liked to do the work right away, to get warmed up a bit, and before she could really see what she was doing. It wasn't her favourite thing, getting her fingers into blood and fur and gristle. The distance of the gunshot she liked, the cool, hard, solid, feel of the gun's barrel. The dead animal was too soft and yet so stiffened — and too cold, cold like the night air.

By the time the bright light of day had come Marie was preparing the fire in one of the fireplaces which had been constructed once upon a time for the campers. It was her habit to roast the coyotes over the fire and then keep the meat in the old freezer that still chugged along in the stock room of the shop. The meat would keep her going for a while without her having to deplete the store of tinned foods too much, and spend money doing so. She patted the pocket full of notes taken from the couple. And she had that leather jacket too, could wear that when she felt like looking good, maybe when she was taking a walk out to the salt pan.

With the fire licking nicely she turned the skinned coyote once on the grill and went for a walk up the nearest outcrop. The heat was coming on now, she could feel as she climbed, always a little later than the bright sunlight, then suddenly it was there, burning. At the top of the ridge she looked down on and out across the valley, at the beguiling smokey blues and russet magentas of the rocks, the colours she knew so well, that she never tired of gazing at. And in the middle of it all that brilliant white saltiest salt, white as snow, glistening in the sun. A few streaks of cloud were drifting across the blue sky, from one bounding ridge of rock in the distance across to the other. All else lay quite still in the already broiling heat.