

People Mover - a novella

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Chapter One

The warm, early morning air blew past the truck at high-speed – hugging it, sliding across its shape, almost fleetingly visible as it rolled over the rig’s scorching metal chassis.

The distinct whistling sound of the wind scoring an otherwise largely silent scene amplified the inherent eeriness of the situation unfolding inside the truck’s cab.

A little girl sat squirming in the passengers’ side seat of the cab, despite no good – or even remotely legal – reason on Earth for her being there.

Continuing to fidget in her seat as she had been doing for the past half-hour, the girl was constantly planning her next move.

The girl’s checkerboard-patterned backpack sat upright patiently between her feet and her left hand rested close to its open side, thumb and forefinger anxiously tugging at the zipper. She knew the man driving beside her was surely as nervous as herself, even with the grimly stern face that he had put on.

Things were getting edgy, but she felt the odds leaned more in her favour with every passing minute.

“I have to use the restroom.” The girl said, not untruthfully, – but not without a calculated angle either.

“We just left the stop half an hour ago. Besides, next closest stop on this route now is at least another hour away.”

The girl deferred down to a crumpled map that lay haphazardly across her lap.

“This says there’s one in two miles.”

“I’ve done this road a million times girl, I know it better than the people who laid it in the first place”

“I’d just hate to mess up your truck is all. The smell isn’t something you’d want to have to get used to. Believe me.”

A surprisingly blunt remark for a girl her age, the driver thought. He made another futile attempt to establish some authority. “Company expects me to make this a speedy delivery. And I’m in charge of this vehicle, and its occupants. So, no more stoppin’”

The girl snaps back dryly without a second’s hesitation.

“Well, I’m in charge of my own bladder. Just it doesn’t always listen to me when I need it most.”

“How old are you again?”

The girl continued fidgeting around in her seat.

“Twelve. Again.”

"I'm starting to think this was a mistake. Your little attitude ain't so welcome with me."

"Starting? Hey, you wanted me to start talking when we left. Personally, I think you could have just ignored me all the way."

He wished he had.

"I thought I could use the company" the man sneered. "How bad could a twelve-year-old be?"

"I'm sorry for not living up to your expectations. I may be mature for my age, but my body still works like any other twelve-year-old's."

She gestured through the windscreen of the truck's cab. "Look, that billboard says there's a stop after the next exit. And if you refuse, I may have to resort to... other means."

The man perceptibly recoiled in his seat at his companion's tone and choice of words. His choices seemed admittedly limited – and his hand, forced.

"Guess it wouldn't hurt to make one more quick stop"

Minutes later, the driver silently detoured into the roadside rest area and parked his truck behind another big rig.

His companion, the twelve-year-old girl, wasn't an ideal traveling partner by any means.

Whenever he had had company in the cab, he usually hoped for someone that could keep him awake with stimulating conversation, – with jokes, or stories they could swap and advice they could share. Ideally, someone trustworthy, and preferably close to his own age.

But this girl was unlike anyone else he'd met in all his twenty-something-year career. She was needy, impractical, petulant. Initially – all too briefly – he had thought of calling the cops or Child Protective Services when he saw her following him on his way back to the truck.

Her story had a dubious taste in his mouth – left alone by her parents in the early morning fog outside a trucker's inn after she wouldn't stop crying in the car? Sounded ridiculous. It didn't add up and he didn't need to take on the responsibility of handling her.

But he felt concerned, and a sense of guilt, or misplaced responsibility, was making ever-larger strides in his conscience. He kept questioning himself, making up theories about what a girl of only twelve years could be doing hitchhiking apparently so far away from home?

Eventually, he surrendered to his curiosity and with perhaps too-much empathy creeping upon him, he decided against calling the authorities, at least immediately.

First mistake?

He knew the risk was high – the police probably wouldn't believe either of their stories if they happened to get stopped by highway patrol out here.

He had quickly trawled through the consequences in his mind. Weighing up the possibilities.

How simply far-fetched the girl's story seemed wasn't making the decision easy. But the tears streaming down her face and the despair in her voice managed to tip the scales her way.

And, she had, after all, only asked for a ride to the next town over: Saint Mary, Montana.

...

Now, in retrospect, the trucker really wished the tears hadn't helped her case.

He started to wish he had lingered on a fleeting idea to call highway patrol then and there.

Most of all, he wished he'd never met her at all.

Now, the situation had changed considerably.

Because barely thirty minutes into their journey together, he realized he had definitely made a mistake.

This crying twelve-year-old girl had just taken out a ten-inch handgun from her backpack and pointed it right to his face.

Chapter Two

The driver weighed up his immediate options while the little girl used the wretched restroom of the truckstop she'd insisted they stop at: he could always pull out onto the highway before she was finished. An act of self-defense, a path back to ignorance.

He noticed a line of trucks making their way into the parking area. A clean exit was still on the table if she took her time. "Girls always did, or maybe... women always did?"

He couldn't deny the fact the little girl was dangerous: a barely five-foot-tall loose cannon that he knew he couldn't afford to entertain any longer.

If nothing else, the driver acted on impulse. If he succeeded, – he knew – he was sure to rid himself of this devilish conundrum.

A twelve-year-old with a deadly weapon and such a 'mature' attitude could be harmful to society. But right now, he couldn't care less about society – frankly, he just wanted to survive.

Freedom was undervalued. Eventually, he decided to take the risk.

This fully-grown man – Joseph Dwight Parsons, Bozeman born and bred, forty-years-old, six-foot-one, real man's man and trucker like his father before him to boot – found the courage to very quickly drive away from the small brown girl who he knew might be back from the bathroom any second now.

Revvng the rig back up with more urgency than perhaps he'd ever had to do anything in his job with before, Parsons checked his driver's side rear-view mirror one final time to see if the girl had in fact reemerged from the restroom yet. Nothing there.

Barely getting one foot back on the truck's accelerator, he flicked a retake. A huge freight transporter was making its way to the parking spot right behind his truck's own. If he were to get out of this successfully now, he had to be sure of his intentions.

The driver waved one sweaty hand profusely, signaling the other truck driver to stop. Once he knew the freight driver had taken notice of his intention to back up, he made one final triple-check in the direction of the restroom. The little girl was still, mercifully, nowhere to be found.

He cleanly backed up, swiveled the alignment of the cab around, and pulled back out onto the highway as fast he could - an unseen smirk already finding its way onto his relieved face.

Chapter Three

The twelve-year-old girl had emerged from the truckstop bathroom half an hour's drive outside Saint Mary just in time to see her most recent means of traveling already on the main road and distantly speeding away.

And another prospective truck with which to go already pulling up where her previous chauffeur had been oh-so-briefly parked.

From her point-of-view, the girl – Helen – had already found the companion for the next stage of her journey. Another trucker. Tattooed hands, thick blond handlebar mustache, a slightly-too-tight well-worn Marlboro T-shirt, and one pair of silvery plastic truckstop sports sunglasses.

It all came together in a perfect pastiche of Middle American masculinity – it all ticked, it all fit. This man would be her ticket from Saint Mary to the next town, or even farther depending on how happy she could keep her new traveling companion.

She could've almost been there by now, admittedly – had it not been for the nerve of the driver who she had left the truckstop restroom just in time to see driving off.

How selfish of him. How smart. How pragmatic.

Helen wouldn't have been mad about it, really – even if she hadn't already found her next target in Mr. Plastic Sunglasses.

Before she set to approaching him, she first fiddled around in her backpack and did a routine check on her most cherished possession. The weapon was still tucked away under a few spare pieces of clothing. It had been very helpful, the gun, to install fear and doubt. She could accomplish much more with it than any girl of her years should normally be able to, just by making it conspicuous. Fear instigates a recklessness in humans, and this reckless panic enables exploitation.

Ready, Helen approached this new trucker and repeated the plea to get her out of here she'd used on her last trucker almost verbatim.

Almost as though he himself is playing along to the same script in Helen's head, Mustache-and-Sunglasses reacts with the same earnest unease and concern.

"So how did a girl... of your age... get here unsupervised anyway?"

"My parents left me here, I think about an hour ago, as punishment. They do that somedays, whenever I become a burden to them."

"That's no reason to leave a child alone. Are you sure they aren't coming back?"

"If it's like last time, I'll be stuck here for at least until the sun sets."

"Maybe I can call the cops and let them know, or-"

"Please mister, I only need to get to the next town."

“Hey, I’m really sorry girl but I’m doing a job here and won’t be stopping for the next eight hours once I get going again.”

Perfect, Helen thought. If he was driving that long, he was most likely crossing the border, or at least getting very close to it. That’s exactly the route she wanted to be on, and the quickest possible way she would get to her final destination. And to make the most of this very fortunate turn of events, she once again had to pull out every possible measure of emotion, drama, and pity she could muster. Something she absolutely hated doing but something that undeniably got results in terse conversations like these.

“You’re my only way to get back home, and I’m really starting to get scared nobody’s gonna help me.”

“That’s because nobody wants to get into any trouble” the trucker let out. The sudden and unusual nature of the situation he now found himself in had reduced him to verbalizing thoughts almost as soon as they appeared in his head. A common side-effect of trying to communicate while under pressure.

The protracted pause after he let those words escape however made Helen realize that this man might prove yet to be a tough rock to crack completely.

Now, the truly dramatic part had to begin.

She put her head down and shrunk into the fetal position, snorting and making liberal use of her ability to practically cry on-demand: a classic move for deception. This worked, almost embarrassingly easily. Helen knew that would be the act to seal it.

The trucker reflexively averted his eyes away from directly looking down at the little girl and started to address her as if really trying to convince himself. “Look, kid, I think the best way to help you is to call the police. But, I don’t just want you alone here crying till the time they get here. So, I’ll drop you off at the next accessible spot because you’re not waiting around in a parking lot all day. Then you’re on your own from there.”

Helen feigned an immediate gratitude just as quickly and as she’d begun crying. “Thank you so much mister, I really do appreciate it.”

Easy. A little crying and these macho types always fold.

Chapter Four

“Your parents usually treat you like this?”

“No. ... sometimes”

He waited for her to continue. Once he realized she wasn't going to talk, he tried to interest her in some food “Have you eaten anything? Would you like a cookie?”

“What kind?”

“I dunno. It's got the cream stuff inside.”

“Ok.”

Helen had always tried to be prudent when it came to accepting food from strangers. She'd heard all the PSAs, but wasn't above taking a free snack. Especially whenever she didn't know for sure when or what her next meal might be either. In the ten minutes or so she'd been in his truck's cab, she'd studied the man to a considerable extent. She had to be careful – an honest façade engulfed every person in the world, like herself. Everyone has something hidden, some dark place they wish they could never visit. Still, it was hard to find any real fault with him as yet.

Besides, her driver was already one-handedly taking the cookies out of their store-bought pre-wrapped sleeve tray. Safe, and very welcome, she concluded.

“You're not much of a talker are ya?” asked the driver, quickly munching down one of the cream-filled cookies he presumably kept in his cab for longhaul trips like these.

“I know I tend to get on people's nerves when I talk.” One of the most honest things Helen had said all day.

“I've got nerves of steel!” Helen's latest driver spat out enthusiastically. He realised a split second later he might have used that term wrong. “But, tell me about your folks. I've never heard of such careless behavior in my years of parenting”

“You're a father?” Helen asked. She tweaked her tone ever-so-slightly to sound like she was actually interested.

“Yeah, I've got a son. Just turned eighteen. Hard to cope with at this age, but I guess you have to let him be. Adolescence can be tough.”

Helen knew what he meant. She had an older brother who whiled away his time smoking and drinking with his friends out in the woods.

“Their attitude isn't worth paying too much attention to” she flatly said back.

“How'd you get to sound so smart? What do you know at your parenting at your age anyway?”

“I understand he's work now. He'll change for good once he gets out of the house and misses his family” said Helen. She was starting to feel uneasy about making this almost-

earnest small talk.

“I guess. So what do your parents do?”

She realized he wouldn't stop the conversation until he got some satisfactory answers. The type of infuriating characters she had had to deal with on this journey – everyone always wants answers. Perhaps it was just a universal thing, part of the human condition. She had decidedly refrained from telling any of her previous traveling companions thusfar the complete truth about her parents: their demeanor, their oft-belligerent moods, their lack of faith in her. And worst, all the crystal meth.

That drug that had ruined her life. For the eleven ten years of her life she was treated well, as well as goes the life of any typical American schoolgirl. Born in the closest thing the Northern flyover states had to a typically Middle Class family, innocently going about her life one cherishable day at a time.

But that eleventh year of her life was when it all took a turn.

It felt like a once-fluffy cloud that had given way to a dark and heavy object falling from the sky with ever-increasing speed, inexorably headed for disastrous contact. Contact that would at least dissolve the anxiety of the unknown hanging overhead.

But, as Helen found, the object had evaded the ground. It only kept falling lower. Plunging ever-lower into an abyss with no visible landing. No contact and no end.

Just as she was starting fifth grade, her grandfather, the one person Helen had always valued over anybody in the world, left her side. She still cherished her grandfather and his memory more than anything else. She just wished she could hear him speak, or hold his hand, or do any of the other simple things grandfathers did so simply and so comfortingly even one more time.

Her grandfather truly had been the one sane and stable person in the household, always keeping things in check, making her parents – his son and daughter-in-law – behave like normal, civilised adult caretakers. A former O-6 logistics officer of the US Army, his principles and morals had mostly kept the more ethically-slack impulses of the other adults in the house at bay. He was Helen's mentor, supporting and compassionate – a light that held off the darkness. His stories and occasional impromptu lectures had crafted her strong and mature mentality.

He had explained to her the malignity of the world around her, the unfair nature of it. He taught her that all human beings are their own worst enemies and it is within one's own best interests to always do their utmost to avoid harm. All the negativity and downright evil in the world was not what mattered in a magical oasis of clear headedness and practical thinking. With his teaching, Helen had created a mental barrier of strength, a shield protecting herself from utter madness.

He often prepared her for the possible worst, and a desirable best in the same breath. The house Helen grew up in was now a wrecked mess and reeked of sickly sour fumes. Her parents had no friends. And Helen was certainly not going to invite any of hers over either, if they even thought of coming.

A sizeable inheritance from her late grandfather had helped her parents survive without

getting off the couch for a real job, all they needed now was an occasional food-run from the nearest Town Pump convenience store and their homestyle hardcore chemical stimulants to keep themselves excited. Her only other remaining family, her older brother Anthony, was more-or-less following suit.

News of her parents' descent into the throws of junkiedom had quickly reached the ears of Helen's wily and awfully judgmental classmates. Never much one to be subjected to any special attention at school before her grandfather's passing, Helen now became latest target of the schools' rumour-mill. She held the distinction of being the loner kid from a bad family in the eyes of her gradeschool peers until her final day of attendance, which just so happened to also be the first day of sixth grade the subsequent year.

Helen never went to school again after she realized it would never forget, and her parents just plain didn't care.

Chapter Five

Helen finally addressed the trucker's question. "My dad's a soil technician on a ranch out here somewhere." She said vacantly. Perfectly mundane, perfectly believable. Completely false.

"Not bad. If he works, he must be able to put food on the table." the driver said, munching on the last of his second cookie.

"I guess." Helen found herself yawning for a good two seconds. As if willing herself tired in the moment, she turned over in her seat, still upright, with minimal explanation to her driver. "I have to go to sleep."

"Alright, well I'll wake you shortly when we're at your stop."

Immediately dormant, Helen began to envision Mount Fairweather. The peaks, the hike, the view to be had from the base of the mountain, let alone the top.

Rough-hewn triangles probing the slate-grey sky. The genteel contrasting colours of snow, rock, and ice floe underneath. It was a spectacle to behold. '*Tsalxhaan*', she knew locals called it.

She had dreamt about it countless times before: a magnificent stretch of land, in all its beauty, setting itself apart from everything else within Glacier Bay National Park, Yakutat Alaska with its sheer height and magnificence.

It was one such dream which had first instilled the confidence in Helen to embark on this journey. She had devised a carefully laid out strategy with contingency plans for every possible scenario.

Among other things, her plan involved stealing – a malicious activity, something she once never would've thought of doing, ever.

It had gone against her grandfather's principles. But she knew that at her age she couldn't find work, nor was she going to be lent much money by her parents. And she was determined to do this now, at this age. And above all else, it was a way out of the dreadful environment she was confined to.

She found solace in the fact that stealing a bundle of loose cash from a stash of her parent's drug money could be euphemistically called a loan. She could try to give it back once this was all over, once she returned as a wiser person. Any real guilt in Helen's mind over taking their money was easily tamped down anyway: it was all grandpa's money after all, and he must've left some of it for his granddaughter.

And then, there was the gun. Her most faithful companion. A sordid apparatus of death, destruction, and intimidation. Helen knew where the gun had been hidden. She had tracked her burnt-out father's movements for weeks to gather his habits.

He tucked it under the bed – out of sight, but still decidedly in her mind.

She quickly found a window of opportunity to steal it from beneath the inattentive eyes of Mom and Dad who were conveniently arguing about something or other in the living room

one acrid afternoon. She slunk away with it, completely unnoticed, and hid it in her backpack the day she was about to embark on her grand trip.

Helen woke up to the smell of smoke and a gently tapping hand on her shoulder. For a moment she thought she was back in her dreaded room. Perhaps her family had given enough of a damn to actually come looking for her. Once her vision cleared, she realized it was the driver, puffing on a cigarette and patting her shoulder with both his eyes still firmly on the road. She was awake and back in the truck once again, still happily miles away from her family home.

Chapter Six

She didn't particularly want to resort to the gun again, truth be told. Helen the gunslinger? No – she might have learned to hold it in her hands together without a nervous muscle tremor by now, but that epithet would never sit right with her.

Helen had set out with the idea of being nice to the world, and to the drivers she would doubtlessly encounter on the journey. If she found that she must resort to acting coercive, it was to be with her words; her knack to somehow convince people through considered speech alone. It wasn't downright evil to find accomplices to join her on this adventure, in hindsight it was just a small roadtrip from one relatively small town to another. But it hadn't been easy. Nothing about this was easy.

From the outset, Helen felt ambitious while still acknowledging the substantial risks she would face, but it was getting harder.

The gun was to be her very last recourse. Her ultimate weapon. A skilled show of handling it and an appropriately threatening choice of words could make any sensible person paint themselves vivid mental pictures they never thought they could.

But she'd had already made use of it once with the last driver.

"Ok. Your safe stop's just coming up next" the trucker croaked, mouth dry from the day's heat and his smoke. He also seemed as if he was trying hard to stay awake after an already considerable long shift driving his rig.

"Great. Back to Hell as I know it."

“Hey, if you were a grown-up, I would've tried to make sense of this life to you, but you're too young to see it now. Just know that no matter how bad things seem right now, it'll always pass eventually”

“Right” ... “Where are you headed next?”

“I'm headed across the border, then on to Calgary after that.”

Helen had memorised the major towns and cities she would most likely encounter over the course of her roadtrip – starting out from her parents' quaint antique cottage turned dingy meth shack just a little ways outside Kiowa. It was then in Browning where she had found her first target: a younger driver whose Good Ol' Country Boy pure helpful intentions, and perhaps a slight deficiency of critical sense, had gotten her onto a major highway with surprising ease.

At first, her plan seemed foolproof. She would sneak out of the house once the sun started to set, – the part of the plan that was all too easy with her uncaring parents. The next bit was to arrange for a ride to take her to the trucker's inn she knew sat waiting once you reached the turn-off for Route 89.

Ralph had helped Helen with this.

Ralph was a boy about her own age she knew from school with a weak heart and a heavy crush. She knew he could be played, exploited to her own benefit. He was blinded by harmless affection and she was very much aware of it.

To his credit, Ralph managed to take her to right up the inn from the main road turn-off she had found herself at on his two-seater bike. He had wondered at the time why she had such an obviously over-stuffed backpack on her, but with fear that Helen would put a sudden end to their ride together, he refrained from ever questioning her about it. He was happy to be around her, especially on such a pleasant evening and with no other pesky boys around to spoil the mood.

He felt like a man of strength, protecting his dear woman. He dropped her off and headed back home as Helen had then brusquely told him to. She felt bad for using Ralph like this, but promised him they would see one another again sometime and then they could have a good talk.

At the trucker's inn, after her stunt with Ralph, Helen made herself comfortable at the root of an isolated tree with a good view of all the parked big rigs. The decorative bushes out front made for an excellent hiding spot and, as Helen had discovered, also not the worst possible place to sleep through the night in several layers of Winter clothing.

She had awoken at the break of dawn to a faint yellow slowly painting a new sky over the starry dark of the Montana night sky.

Helen momentarily wondered if any of the other towns she was sure to pass through would provide views as beautiful as this morning's sky too.

In any case, it wasn't long until she found her target man, a clean-shaven driver emerging from the doors of the inn, taking in the fresh breath of the morning air. He looked friendly enough, and Helen had hoped she still did too despite having spent the night in a shrubbery. That had been the man who would be leaving her behind at the reststop outside Saint Mary shortly thereafter.

Earlier that morning was now just a fleeting recollection.

But in her new truck, Helen's current associate was friendly enough – unlike the smoke from his cigarette, and very unlike her first aide-de-camp had ultimately proved to be.

Calgary was perfect she thought, too good to resist. Helen knew her instinct to choose this new driver was dead-on. This was going well, but she was keenly aware it could've gone otherwise. It could still, in fact.

Helen abruptly felt a sense of regret fill her head. Since she had knowledge of his final destination, she could've been thinking of ways to convince him to take her with him. Instead, she had been snoozing comfortably.

Stupid move. Very lazy.

If she was to do this, she had to be much more observant, careful, and ultimately, shrewd. But now it was almost too late. Her driver was spearheading his truck past more and more of that beautiful Montana countryside was passing with every second.

Helen was making progress towards her goal, true. But she still faced an ever-ticking clock that was steadily turning her current situation into one that, regretfully, might only be remedied by pulling out the gun again.

Helen started up with a very deliberate question. “What time is it?”

The driver stole the briefest of glances at his wristwatch. “About quarter-past seven”.

“It’s still early. The stop you leave me at could still be scary this early out.”

“Don’t you worry. I called the town sheriff while you were havin’ ya nap. They’ll be picking you up at the next stop very soon.” The driver assured Helen with an unflappably proud look imprinted on his face.

Helen was rattled.

She had not planned for this.

She could hear the sound of her heart beating in her head.

... “That’s mighty kind of you.” ... “Does your son ever come home around this time?”

“I’d hope not. I saw him sneaking out past his bedtime once when he was just about lightly older than what you are now. But my punishment set him straight.”

“I doubt it.”

“What?”

“I said – I doubt he never snuck out again without you being aware of it. I think maybe he just got better at it.”

“I don’t know what your parents do for you, but in my house I retain a strict climate to keep

my kid under control.”

“My parents don't care. I snuck out of the house yesterday.”

“Wait. ... What?”

Helen explained her story from the start, carefully avoiding the part that involved the gun.

“I don't believe this. I'm travelling with a twelve-year-old, taking her to a place she's never even been?”

“Yes, I'm glad you see through it. And I would really appreciate it if you could please take me all the way to Calgary.”

“No way girl. I don't want nothing to do with you anymore and no trouble. I am handing you over to the sheriff.”

“Look sir. That could land you into a lot of trouble” said Helen, realizing it might be no use trying persuading a lost cause.

“Yeah, right.” her driver remarked sarcastically.

“There may already have been a missing child alert issued by my family. If you take me directly to the police and I frame my story in such a way that makes you look like you have been using me from the start ... I don't think it would be well received. And you don't have much time to think about it”

“Hey, I haven't done anything wrong here, so ju-”

“Except pick up a stranded young girl randomly at a truckstop and try to leave her at the next one? How do you think the cops will read between the lines?” Helen felt all the more emboldened cutting this adult off so disarmingly.

The driver's face contorted unmistakably into what could only be described as a contemplative grimace for a fraction of a second. He could see how this easily seemed to the ear of an outsider. Suddenly, he was faced with a decision that could dictate his future.

One misunderstanding with the police and it could be years behind bars. He felt stunned. He felt sick. He felt a slight rage form inside him, a rage that could perhaps make irrational decisions for him. He thought about stopping his truck and forcefully throwing the girl out. He chided himself inwardly. “Look, this isn't a game I want to play. I have dealt enough with your rubbish”

Helen continued, “I promise, I won't be a pest. I simply want to be dropped off at your destination.”

“We'd have to cross the border. No way in Hell am I dealing with that with you.”

“I'll deal with that. Just do as I say.”

“I am not dealing with the goddamn border police. That's a whole other thing. This has got nothing to do with me. I tried to help you because I thought you were in trouble but I don't wanna to be the one facing the fall for all the good I've ...”

He stopped short of finishing his sentence. He felt his right cheek contort to the touch of a tube-like object pressed hard against the skin of his face.

For a second, his mind simply failed to comprehend the moment. But only for a second, it all fell into place quick enough.

Point-blank with disaster. Heart pounding, an unprecedented sense of danger was taking over him. This was a gun's cold barrel, presently pushed into his face by a twelve-year-old girl.

Most crime, much like most sports, is a contest of emotions. Two parties with vastly different ideas and reactions. Even among those off the field, sympathy for the underdog and a paradoxical dislike for the crowd-favorite boil up within the spectators. The latter, for the most part, triumph because they have the tools, the equipment, the players, and the will to make it happen.

The truck driver thought of all the disgusting child-related true crime stories he had heard about over the years; trafficking, abuse, abandonment.

How the dominant breed got away with most of it. By all rights, - his own good intentions aside - he should be the dominant one here: the more physically built, richer, adult person in this scenario. But he was made the neutered underdog by the presence of one simple piece of equipment in the hands of a mere schoolgirl.

Now, he was in the midst of one Hell of a conundrum. On the receiving end of a gunbarrel, cowed in true fear and trapped in the cab of his own sixty-ton Mack like a mouse in a cage.

A calm, rational, and ordered grasp of the situation might have deduced that there was to be no easy way out of this situation.

However, for good or ill, hope springs eternal.

The Glock 19 is a semiautomatic, recoil-operated handgun with a four-inch barrel, capable for firing its standard capacity magazine of fifteen 9mm rounds at muzzle speeds of well over one-thousand feet-per-second at an operational lethality range of up to fifty metres. Lightweight, compact, competitively priced, and wielded easily by military personnel, law-enforcement officials, and responsible, conscientious, citizens from all walks of life, it is one of America's most widely used sidearms.

Such a weapon in the hands of a little girl would be bad enough. But Helen didn't have a mere Glock, she had The Dezzy.

None of the pedestrian Glock-19's sleekness, matte finish, affordability, or typical civilian availability matched up to the bulk of the Desert Eagle .50 Cal pistol.

The Desert Eagle – or, "a Dezzy", as it is otherwise so proudly known as by many, including Helen's hated parents, is a slick, chrome-plated device used widely by gangsters, wannabe-gangsters, overenthusiastic props departments, and the Israeli Military to announce style and swagger in a distinctly boastful manner otherwise unachievable with a more modest handcannon.

But one doesn't need to be a guns expert to know that, in any case, it's another handheld launcher for a small metallic missile that's made to travel fast, pierce the air, and only ever stop once it makes contact with another entity along its path. Often, a human target.

Truthfully, very little good was ever envisaged by anyone behind a Dezzy, but curiously it also happened to be what Helen felt connected herself to her late grandfather the most.

Once again, the family Dezzy was being held in the sweaty, twelve-year-old, palms of a little girl, who had it squarely lined up, point blank, at the visibly bewildered face of an unlikely travelling companion – a truck driver she hadn't even bothered to yet learn the name of.

The gun's half-inch wide barrel all but touching the driver's fourteen-hour stubble. So close to its target, the bullet inside would never see daylight.

"Pull over. Now" Helen said with the utmost sternness in her voice.

The driver crackled his dry mouth. "Jesus Christ, what are you doing? Put that down, you'll hurt yourself."

"I don't think it's me you should be worried about."

"I... I don't understand why you are doing this. Put it down and we can talk."

"We can talk either way."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I simply want you to listen to what I'm saying. And don't do anything stupid. I've fired this before and I will not hesitate to do it again."

"We're in a moving truck. If you shoot me, we're both going to end up off the road"

"I'm aware of the situation. So stop the truck on the shoulder and turn off the engine and raise your hands to your head."

Stiffly, the driver obliged. He looked for a wide shoulder on the right side of the road with enough room for a freight transporter. Typically, stopping on the shoulder should only be used in an emergency. "Did this count as one? Surely," he thought.

After a mile, he switched on the hazard lights when he found the road widening. There was a protocol to be followed in this situation, he actually had been trained for it, but his new hitchhiker friend had made him forget all about it. His mind was racing with adrenaline, a million thoughts, and very few decisions to make. And he did exactly what Helen had asked of him.

"I want you to take me across the border and do as I say. Simply remain calm with the border police and silently take me with you to Calgary."

"Please put the gun down."

"I will. The sooner you realize this is your only way to see your kid again, the better."

"I can't just sneak a random kid into Canada! You need documentation. And there aren't no weapons allowed North'a the border, either."

"You let me worry about that" she paused "Just answer truthfully – have you sent the paperwork for this truck through to the border station yet?"

"My foreman takes care of that through the freight company."

"Will you be heading into the primary lane directly?"

"Yes, that's what I have always done. And how do you know all this stuff?"

"Perfect." Helen said under her breath. She ignored his question. "Let's get moving, I'll fill you in on the way. How long till we reach the border?"

"Maybe another hour."

"Good. Keep driving. And don't pull any tricks. And give me your phone."

The driver handed over his well-worn mobile. She made sure it was completely off then tucked it deep into her backpack for the time being.

A silence prevailed in the truck.

It was windy and starting to chill outside. Back at home, Helen had practiced her threatening speeches in front of a mirror continuously till she felt her voice gain an air of confidence.

Threats can only be validated by an aura of authority from whoever makes them.

Helen had actually never held a weapon in all her life prior to the day she stole The Dezzie from her parents. And truthfully, she certainly had never fired it before. She didn't need to of course. It's not the sort of thing an otherwise typical pre-teen girl had much cause to.

Never one to be a headliner, she was happy with her unimportantly schoolyard gossip and trivial ambitions.

Regardless of how unfortunate her home life was, she saw to never get entwined in any narrow-minded quarrels and possessed the right attitude towards life to seemingly always stay out of any unfriendly disputes.

A mature head, but one happily unknown to any real danger before.

Helen had no great desire to peek around the corner of the wall protecting her from the wickedness of the world early. No damning curiosity to see what lurked behind just for the sake of it.

But this was necessary evil.

A complex state of affairs she had planned out since the thought of this expedition had first crossed her mind and quickly solidified in it.

Unfortunate as it all was, she had to instill fever inside the brain of her accomplice, her to-be breaker of international border law. There was still compassion somewhere within her, but a boldness outside now too. The grotesque device in her hands and the drive to see her goal through overcome her mentor's – her grandfather's – pragmatic wisdom.

For now, within the confines of the truck, she was willing to lie and threaten and explore that real wickedness of the world firsthand.

The unlikely party of two were still traveling North in the uncomfortable hush of the truck's interior, inconspicuous to the outside world.

The small clock on the truck's dashboard blinked: 8:30 AM now.

They were getting closer to the Canadian border and Helen was still mulling over what exact words she would need to best convince the border officials of the story she was brewing.

In the mind of her driver swirled thoughts of illegal immigration, bribes, crime, blackmail, her gun. All far from what he had expected today's job to be. Frankly, very far from what he expected any day's job to look like.

Suffice to say, this was not how a smooth freight delivery was supposed to go down. Tranquility – a peaceful state of mind – was all he desired now, but dying here was not the way he wanted to earn it.

Whatever could have possessed this little girl was proving harder to even begin to comprehend with every passing minute and mile closer to the border.

It was hard not to feel utterly helpless with every moment he contemplated the dreaded object in her hand. Was the gun loaded? Was she prepared to use it? Neither would surprise him at this point.

The trucker's mind was examining and calculating every next move just as much as that of the little girl beside him. But the way he saw it, this was not the time for rash actions or action-movie heroics.

He felt, but fought, the reckless urge to snatch the gun from the feeble hands of the girl. The driver knew such a hasty move could very quickly result in a death, or two.

"What's your name, Sir?" Helen asked, breaking the stream of muffled noise coming only from the moving truck's engine.

"Lewis Plummer" the driver answered flatly. Almost grateful to have any conversation at all to distract him from his ongoing internal stream-of-consciousness panic.

"Do you mind if I call you by your name from now."

"Are you giving me a choice?"

"I'm sorry things have gotten crazy for you. I had to plan a way for somebody to take me across the border."

"And this is the way to do it?"

"I had no choice. I don't have the money or the means of my own to pull this off otherwise."

The driver – Lewis – lost for words momentarily, eyed the gun still resolutely pointed directly at him.

Helen had pulled it away a few inches away from his face, but kept it level with the man's head. Still highly damaging, mentally and – should the worst come to pass - physically.

“This was my only way to convince you to do this for me. I really don't want to hurt you and I hope you don't lead me into need to mister. But we're only a little bit out from Alberta now”

“And what exactly are you going to do once we reach the border?” A very good question. Asked with an affected nonchalant tone that almost disguised the sheer panic in the man's mind.

To paint a picture of the Canadian border entry lanes for motor vehicles, one would do well to imagine an imperfect resemblance to a standard American tollgate. Drivers are required to choose the appropriate lane for the nature of their entry – commercial, residential re-entry, holidaymaking, those sorts of normal everyday reasons – and then hand over documents pertaining to their arrival and business in the country.

It's a very standard procedure of give and take, but like any area crawling with men and women in Blue uniforms – or perhaps even RCMP Mountie Red – there are necessary restrictions and little formalities to follow. And the whole process is only made needlessly difficult by hesitant and jittery answers.

For licensed and bonded truckers, like Mr. Lewis Plummer, the paperwork to cross the US-Canada border can be sent beforehand and with the help of a customs broker. A process which allowed for a smooth crossing and minimal interruption. The 'bill of lading', a customs invoice that dictated the value of a vehicle's load in both American and Canadian dollars, as well as an electronic manifest provided by the broker together all generally made for effortless international travel between the Lower Forty-Eight and the Great White North.

For the sake of convenience and the operation of an efficient business, Lewis' manager back at the freight agency had of course seen to it that everything necessary had been filed as-required beforehand. And usually, these documents ensured Lewis' easy entry into, and swift departure through, a primary commercial lane.

Much to Helen's imminent chagrin, however, the unexplained presence of a little girl such as herself in the truck's cab, would very quickly draw the eye of an inquisitive customs officer that the pair was now slated to encounter within the next half-hour.

Starkly barren land greeted travelers on either immediate side of the border. As if the innate vitality of the countryside itself had been cleared away to make room for this customs checkpoint.

A few houses, all of which looked abandoned sat a stone's throw away from the main road. Houses with hanging clapboards, rusted metallic roofs, brownstone chimneys, and peeling timber walls that bore absolutely no signs of life on the exterior.

The weather became more and more pessimistic with every minute of the morning that passed. Not merely gloomy, distinctly pessimistic. The yellow dawn had given way to a, fog-filled, mid-morning that made anything fifty feet away little more than another indiscernible blur in the chilly haze.

Two glimmering dots of light and the silhouette of the customs and immigration checkpoint slowly emerged into view just ahead of Lewis and Helen. Their truck wordlessly welcomed into the end of a long line of matching vehicles.

Little over half an hour feels like a day, but the pair eventually reaches the front of the line.

The time had arrived. Time for Helen to find a capacity within herself to perform the sort of unflinching delinquency which would be necessary to ensure her unimpeded crossing of this border.

The modern-day US-Canadian border-crossing process involves a fairly uncomplicated procedure of document presentation accompanied by a series of questions the visitors are expected to answer- whether you're in a freight truck or not. The less documentation one had and more apprehensive you acted, the more likely you'll be restrained by the authorities for further questioning.

Every guard, who works any crossing along the border - on either side - is thoroughly trained into the role. But mistakes are always at least theoretically possible - no one ever said customs and border security is perfect.

This particular crossing on the Montana-Alberta line – the one our protagonist and their travelling companion were about to enter –, was certainly not used as much as the entry point between, say, New York and Québec, - or even Minneapolis and Ontario. Crossing here would hopefully be much more lax than attempting to do so at most inspection stops along the US-Canada border – in spite of what Mountie-adorned PSAs you might have seen on the walls of one of these very places would have you believe.

Helen had thoroughly researched experiences, rules, criminal stories, and arrests of people passing through these checkpoints before beginning her journey.

She could tell you off the top of her head - the rules for a minor heading up North with an adult were simple: you must remain with a parent or legal guardian, present your passport and birth certificate, behave at all times, - and ideally you mustn't be over the zero-stolen-and-unregistered-firearms-per-child limit.

Those rules, admittedly, might Helen given her current situation.

Go time. A border police officer approaches Helen and Lewis' truck from the front, driver's side. For perhaps the twelve time that morning - he looks down at two pieces of paper firmly clasped in the left hand.

Then at the license plate of the truck before him. Back to his paper. He lifts it, stares at the second paper of his pair.

Eyes back to the truck. Then back to the paper.

A third time - back to the truck, back to the paper.

The officer purses, then immediately unpurses, his lips. Whatever he was doing with the papers is evidently done, and he steps right up to the driver's side cab door.

"Passports?" the cop says shooting a firm glance at the two passengers of the truck.

"You got the lading sent head, advance, yeah. Customs invoice there guy?"

Lewis obliged. He was visibly nervous, but he had done this before without any disputes.

The only difference now was his hitchhiker: a girl of twelve with a big gun possibly ready to pop him right in the head with it at any moment.

Said gun had momentarily been removed from its place right next to Lewis' head and shoved into the top of Helen's backpack, but the threat it posed hadn't gone anywhere.

Knowing that the weapon could be back at his temple within a split second, Lewis had figured that the safest way to go moment-to-moment right now was to follow the girl's lead and not needlessly rock the boat.

Although, unbeknownst to Helen, he was about to be presented with a small window of opportunity – a safe chance to explain his situation to the law.

"Looks like your invoice is in order Mr. Plummer. May I speak to the passenger please?"

"... Yes, officer?" Helen said. Her heart instantly pounding.

"What is the purpose of your visit?"

"I'm visiting my aunt. This is my uncle right here"

"I see." The guard's expression showed absolutely no signs of change and he proceeded to not say anything for the next five seconds. Then he cleared his throat and resumed addressing the girl: "As you are a minor, you are required to have a guardian to enter this country. Assuming this is your guardian today, I will not be able to allow you into this country without proper documentation and authorisation from your parents."

"Yes officer. What documentation do you need?"

"I will need a declaration that your parents are expected to provide for your travel. I will also need your birth certificate."

"Sure. Give me one moment." Recited Helen, just as practiced.

Helen bent down and rummaged through the belongings in her backpack. This was the first step into fooling the border police – a toothless ask by them that she was prepared for.

At home, her preparations had made her think of every possible obstacle and pressing scenario. This was by far the highest wall she needed to jump over, but she was ready. All she needed was a forged signature on a printed template of words, easily found with one internet search: 'border access entry letter for minors'.

In her effort to find the pieces of paper she had thrown into a laminated envelope tucked away under a change of clothes in the bag, Helen almost forgot about the giant gun she left at the top of the backpack. The foolish work of a multitasking head.

Her trembling fingers found the necessary envelope. A few seconds later, while she was pulling the documents out from the bottom of her bag, Helen suddenly became fully aware once again of the gun and her hostage.

She shifted her gaze over to her driver, but it was too late. Lewis was clearly moving his eyes and brows profusely at the officer, shaking his head with obvious intent - gesticulating wildly, but silently, that something was wrong.

This was his fortunate window of opportunity.

Helen felt her heart's beating redouble in her chest. A faint voice inside her head almost seemed to whisper: "the tables might have turned."

Chapter Ten

“What did you say?”

“Nothing. Damn that stupid kid. Where'd she go?”

“Beats the Hell outta me. She's probably at some party or something. Where'd you put the next batch?”

“Same place as always.”

“She'll probably be back tonight anyway. Let's get one in before we call the cops or CPS or whatever regardless.”

“Yeah and what if cops do show up here and grab us instead?”

“If she's not back by tonight, their priority will be Helen. If they knew we were dealing, they would've locked us by now, right?”

“But they can't come in here! And now they will. Because the kid's missing.”

“We'll be careful. If they want us locked up, they need probable cause to enter. Because we ain't letting them fuck up our operation here. So stop being paranoid.”

“Yeah, the Hell we aren't. I'll go get the crystal.”

Bose and Anna Baronhurst. They complimented each other perfectly in a relationship only they could comprehend the actions of more often than not.

They were at war with sanity itself, with only a future of unrestrained base instinct and self-destruction waiting to happen. But they didn't care much and neither did their progeny.

Their youngest, Helen Baronhurst, was currently far from the reach of these cretins, but right in the midst of a self-manufactured problem of her own.

...

“Uncle Lewis,” Helen said.

Lewis immediately shot a glance at her. He knew he had been discovered. Worse still, his beguiling plan to get the attention of the officer might have been in vain, he thought. A risk that hadn't paid off.

His mind ran the full gamut of human emotion, from the glee that he'd perhaps passed his message on, to thrill, to regret, to danger, and now, a strange guilt.

He looked into her eyes with dilated pupils, ready for the inevitable. But Helen had other thoughts. She slowly shifted her gaze over to the border police officer and stretched her hand out to pass over a wad of documents she'd pulled from her backpack.

The Dezy was stuffed back down deep as it could go into Helen's bag.

The agent looked over her papers just as he had done the truck's. He asked Helen a few questions about her parents. He then turned to Lewis to ask about his return. After assessing their answers and discovering nothing of suspicion, he handed their documents back. Everything checked out, and their answers were perfectly normal.

But hidden behind the bored mask of any professional border security document-checker was a person who was trained to recognize the slightest guilt in an individual's face.

The border agent had picked up on Lewis' skittish behavior. And he already knew his next move: to check the contents of the truck.

A move not particularly welcomed by Helen. But something, that on at least this occasion, Lewis couldn't be more pleased by.

Lewis pulled his truck around to a parking bay adjacent to the checkpoint as directed by the guard. Helen had to resort to Plan B.

"Do as I say."

"I already am."

"Shut up. Don't play me. I saw you signaling the officer. You're lucky I didn't shoot you." Helen said, straining under her breath to keep her words down as best she could.

"I don't want anybody dead. All I asked for is a little favour. But now you've gone and left me with no choice."

"You have to understand your time is up. They're going to interrogate us separately and they are going to find the gun. I can prove my innocence but you can't. I don't know what you think you're doing, but this is over."

"No. Listen. You're going to do exactly as I say."

"I ain't doing anything."

"Alright then." Helen said curtly.

While the pair had a moment without a custom agents right next to them, Helen awkwardly jammed the sidearm inside an old, empty, double-large, styrofoam soda cup which sat stickily in the truck cab's passenger-side door cupholder alongside a small pile of empty cookie sleeve-tray wrappers from some long-forgotten previous roadtrip of Lewis'.

The giant gun bulged out the sides of the soda cup a little, but it still fit in there well enough Helen could even get the lid back on.

Thank God for the ludicrous size of soda in this country these days. Where else but America could a twelve-year-old find a massive foam soft-drink cup to hide their equally oversized firearm in?

They were now parked in their assigned slot within the truck bay- and Helen quickly placed the sticky, Dezzy-laden, cup back into the slot on her door, giving the impression of a unconsumed trucker-sized Coca Cola.

The risk was great. But the best hiding places are often always those in plain sight.

She turned to Lewis. There was no way she could get out of this without making one final threat. With no gun, – temporarily without the Dezzy – she had to bring her malign words back into play.

She had thought of it at the moment, it came naturally to her, and she was thankful. An idea that was almost certain to successfully coerce him. Helen had chosen him to be her driver largely because, even from a cursory examination, he had fit the profile, checked her boxes. And she knew she could sway this man.

“If you tell the cops anything other than what I’m about to tell you, you are going to find yourself in a lot of trouble. Because you’d be wise to know, my parents are bjunkies, and I’ve hidden a bag of crystal meth in this truck. And I’m pretty sure I will be easily able to convince the police it’s yours if I have to.”

Chapter Eleven

A different customs officer than the one who'd inspected the truck's papers directed Lewis to open the cab's doors, and lead him through a door to their immediate right into the border security complex.

A second officer asked Helen to pick up her belongings and follow him. He guided her into a small off-white room two doors along.

Helen felt queasy.

This cramped room was further divided into four cubical booths with glass mounted walls and an atmosphere of professional apathy. Two more border policemen each dressed in crisp Blue uniforms stood talking to one another on either side of another door which presumably lead further into this customs checkpoint.

Helen began to nervously fidget with a strap on her backpack, as the man she was following walked towards, then through, this next door – glancing back as he crossed the threshold to ensure she was still following along.

Helen's officer asked her to wait here momentarily. In this windowless, halogen-lit, room occupied by nothing else but a few steel folding-chairs atop a thoroughly scuffed linoleum floor.

As innocent as Helen might otherwise appear, she feared her hopes for entry depended entirely on the bluff she had told Lewis a minute ago.

After ten minutes of being subjected to the stark silence of this empty room, a large figure entered.

It was the officer who'd walked her in.

He sat down in the spare folding-chair, asked her a few basic questions about her family, the nature of relationship with 'Uncle Lewis', and her intention to enter Canada with him.

The conversation itself lasted no longer than maybe five minutes, and Helen felt surprisingly comforted by his demeanor.

He was professional, but a little apprehensive - giving off the impression that perhaps he'd never interrogated a twelve-year-old girl before.

This made it all the easier for Helen, who for the past twenty-four hours had largely flourished of the unease of her company.

She managed to continue successfully pulling off her innocent schoolgirl character for this austere-looking, but as it turns out, surprisingly affable man.

After that handful of easily answerable questions, the officer left the room and asked Helen to stay put a few minutes more until they cleared her uncle.

Though glad to be done talking, Helen figured that if the same questions were put to Lewis, she just had to hope he'd lie for her – and lie with enough confidence to not get the

both of them in very serious trouble.

Helen knew she had all the right documentation. And she had to figure the gun hidden the truck wasn't going to become a problem either.

Presumably, if they'd found it, she'd have been asked a few more question than just the standard immigration inspection rigamarole.

Right now, all Helen's hopes rested on the threat she'd made – or on Lewis' nerves, if anything, – either way, it was out of her hands now until the next phase of the journey.

...

Maybe fifteen minutes pass in silence.

The first officer – not the one who'd lead her in here, but the one who'd inspected the truck's papers outside – strides into the room, draws Helen's gaze, and lets out exactly three words:

"Come with me."

Chapter Twelve

5:00 PM.

Dark, far-off, silhouettes of houses and trees appeared at the base of a sky filled with all the colors of a Albertan Winter afternoon.

The orange slowly faded into the faintest dash of cerulean blue where the sun made an effort to shine its last light of the day.

Minutes later, the sky would begin to dim, and a similar – albeit, far less magical – orange shade from the streetlights would illuminate the ground and road below.

...

Helen and Lewis were still travelling up North. They were now only two hours away from Calgary, Lewis' final stop. But he wasn't sure about it anymore. In his travel with the girl, he had managed to experience a routine delivery of goods turn into more than a lifetime's worth of peril. A thrill, that after the border incident, he had almost looked back on and welcomed.

They had talked quite a lot after the border. Helen told him a great deal about her family, her grandfather's death, her school, her social life, Ralph the lovestruck boy she'd used for transportation, and the hobbies she once loved.

She explained her wealth of knowledge by crediting it to her innate curiosity – a characteristic which meant she could ignore her parents' misery and continue to learn through books and, occasionally, the internet. She had even told him about the first driver, how she threatened him, and his escape, which left Lewis admittedly a little concerned.

All the same, he had enjoyed the conversation and he was starting to feel altogether little bit happier about accompanying her after she had mentioned her motives.

It was quite unusual, Lewis noted. He had hated her just this morning. Getting past all the threats, in his now much more relieved state of mind, he found her to be quite the character.

The return to tranquility that he had sought above all else before had come into existence here, in its own strange way. Lewis settled into the idea that Helen was harmless inside, at her very core. Her disturbing methods were most likely only means to send a message across.

Back at the border, he had ultimately decided against the risk of not siding with her and her 'uncle' story. He had answered all his officials' questions, which, thankfully, weren't too invasive. And now – if nothing else – he was gaining a few insights into parenting his own son.

After they ended up being let through by immigration security, and following an early lunch and two coffees each at a small family diner just over the Canadian border, the pair had started making proper headway deeper into the Province of Alberta.

How very quickly their mid-morning brush with customs had given way to the evening.

Helen found no need to threaten him anymore and Lewis was content to let her come with. His biggest fear this morning had been being snagged by the border police, but that had passed now.

Any news about a missing girl in Montana would hopefully not make too many waves across the border. Besides, Helen had convinced him that her parents were never going to deal with the police. In this unfair world, the reality of missing children alludes to an unpleasant fact: after the first day, the fate of abducted children is generally assumed to be sealed. Hundreds of children disappeared everyday across the globe, another sad truth many people still seemed almost willfully ignorant to.

Admittedly, Lewis wasn't entirely unworried about his fate in all this. He had been given a handwritten letter by Helen stating that he was in no way responsible for her disappearance, nor for the activities he had partaken in with her.

Perhaps a futile piece of evidence to have, should things take a turn for the absolute worst, but Lewis was happy to have it all the same.

Lewis felt an unusual mix of emotions. He was certainly not happy to have met her initially. But that had changed awfully quickly, having learnt more about her, now having successfully helped her get a lot closer to where she needed to go.

Still, a strange sense of fear was progressing in his conscience, he was afraid. Afraid for his family, his own self, and for the girl. He felt something of a premonition, a forewarning to a disastrous event waiting to happen, but he wasn't sure what it was. He wasn't sure who it was for, or why.

He looked over to Helen's seat in the cab of his truck and saw her happily mouthing along to the unfamiliar pop music gently emanating from the radio. Her brash attitude and on-demand intensity truly interwoven with an innocent soul.

And Lewis hadn't forgotten about the crystal meth apparently hidden somewhere in his truck. But for now, that didn't worry him.

In the back of his mind, he couldn't shake the smallest feeling Helen would find trouble.

And he would be heavily responsible.

...

On the highway ahead, a distance marker read 'Calgary 15'.

Chapter Thirteen

Mankind's impulse to create and invent is built-in. Hardcoded. Essential.

There exists an innate human desire to see one's current limits surpassed.

Some of us sate this impulse by making novel machines.
A machine invented in the hope of making life 'easier', - lazier even.

From the invention of the wheel right through to the next generation of cars that might theoretically drive themselves: practically all inventions are created in the hope of satisfying the same desire – the desire for comfort.

Such inventions have made progress through the ages of Man as we know them possible - each era of history constantly improving an already existing concept.

...

Here, hitherto, in a particular unnatural state of affairs, two machines have played a significant role.

A gun, The Dezzy, had served one purpose – and the truck Helen had spent the best day of her life in served another.

Lewis' faithful Mack that she had commandeered to serve her own ends.

A truck she was about to step out of and never see again.

...

A battle of wits won with the help of some precise timing, a war of words, a show of strength and an exercise in declarative authority had made the experience all the more memorable for Helen.

Her journey had lasted around two days total now from the very outset, and she had grown exponentially bolder within that brief period.

Everything she had tried up to this point had more-or-less gone down according to plan too.

There had been a few known-unknowns, but nothing her mettle evidently couldn't endure.

Helen's research had sketched out the rough plan of her journey and the eventual reality of it hadn't turned out to be that much different. Her determined will had gotten her to Calgary now, across one border, and halfway to the next. She had grown rather fond of Lewis, who had proven to be a good choice of driver.

She felt sad at the thought of not seeing him again. And not just of letting go of a healthy asset.

He had done enough - any further persuasion would most likely only enrage him, Helen figured. And she couldn't use the gun again, not after what she had asked of him - not after

he had delivered.

She had to look for new means of transportation.

“Can you please drop me off at the busiest street in Calgary. That's where I should be able to find travelers heading my way.”

“I can't take this truck on a busy, narrow street. Especially not at this hour. Besides, if you're looking for travellers, I wouldn't think they would waste any time on the streets.”

“But it's getting dark already. And not too many people go too far at night. Everybody's gotta sleep somewhere. The way I see it, what better place to look than around a nice city hotel?”

“I can't win with you. Look, I have to park the trailer at a loading dock for my company. They're going to move in the morning. I can stay with you till the night passes or you can sleep in here.”

“That's a really nice offer but I don't have much time to waste. Now I need to find someone who's going straight through British Columbia and up to Alaska.”

“That might be a tough find.”

“You don't know how generous drunk sightseers can be.”

“Ah, I should've guessed. I'll drop you off somewhere up near 26th Street then. You can make use of the buses from there.”

“Sounds like a plan. But are you sure you don't want to come with me? This could be an exciting journey for the both of us.”

“I'd risk losing my job if I did that. Unfortunately I gotta say no.”

They made their way closer to 26th. Lewis stopped the truck on an almost-empty street.

“Alright, this is goodbye then. Don't get into too much trouble. Call the number I gave you if you're in desperate need of assistance. And good luck”

“Thanks, but I'll be fine. And good luck to you too.”

“Alright, kid. Now get on with it.”

Helen took the phone she had confiscated off Lewis earlier in their journey together out of her backpack and silently handed it back over to him. She got off the truck and firmly closed the door behind her. She checked her belongings and waved goodbye to Lewis. As he restarted the truck, Helen remembered the meth lie and shouted over to him: “I never really hid anything in the truck. You won't have a problem going back over the border.”

“Ahh, good to know,” replied Lewis, his suspicions about her earlier claim confirmed. He calmly pumped on the accelerator and disappeared out of sight into the Calgary night.

...

The whole of 26th Street was lined with very tall, very brightly lit-up buildings. Each competing against the next for the attention of passing denizens.

The entrance to a shopping arcade, a couple of cafes, what looked to be an Asian takeout place, a handful of chain outlet stores, a budget motel – Helen took note of them all, but continued walking along under the lights of the high-street facade until she came across a run of four or five bars and taverns all in a row.

After taking a moment to study her surroundings and the number of vehicles parked at the side of the road, Helen strolled up to the entrance of an old and particularly busy looking establishment.

Along the footpath, many small puddles of melty snow-slush water reflected the streetlights' glow that shone down from on high. The air around Helen was filled with different music coming from every direction, punctuated by the constant chattering and occasional laughter of a nightlife distinct in full swing.

A setting so youthful - yet Helen was still, by rights, too young for any of it.

...

She stopped just short of entering her chosen speakeasy and read its name off the majestic varnished oak board on the front: 'The Hackney Carriage ~ Authentic Olde English Pub'

Helen thought there was an air of smarmy pomp to it, herself. But the name and the decor didn't matter. This bar, – or rather, one of it's patrons – ought to suit all the requirements she'd be looking for in a next travelling companion perfectly.

Chapter Fourteen

A distinct forceful whooshing sound was audible all round the small pocket of the city Helen now found herself in. The frigid Winter wind blew with a shifting intent that night.

It was early November, midway between the clear skies of Autumn and the inevitable heavy snowdrifts that hit this part of the World by mid-December. Chilly weather and the season of thankfulness and giving: Winter was the perfect time for Helen's journey.

...

This pub, 'The Hackney Carriage' was certainly a quaint affair.

A surreptitious peek through a window gave away its nature. Inside table service coexisting with an outdoor drinking area. The open-air patio had a bar, occupied by a large group of civilians – some drinking away their sorrows but most reveling happily. TVery standard bar furnishings.

What stood out though, was that the indoor section of the pub proper came resplendent with all manner of pseudo-British memorabilia: upright red postbox placeholders, bonechina teacups patterned with dour bulldogs, a row of painted portraits hanging above the service area featuring everyone from Shakespeare to Churchill to even a few podgy regal-looking types Helen's own interest in history still didn't help her name.

The whole, expat-pandering, overpriced gastropub might as well have actually been a cheap props storeroom for period dramas set anywhere between 1066 and The Blitz that also just happened to stock gin and tikka masala for how haphazardly the Brit décor had been thrown around the room.

But since Helen wasn't exactly here as The Calgary Herald's latest nightlife critic, that didn't really matter to her.

A long-rusted wrought iron fence separated the patio from the sidewalk. The whole outdoor section was occupied by tables and chairs for anybody with a stiff upper lip who wanted to take their pint-glass of warm English beer out in the frosty Canadian air.

...

Helen found a spot beside the fence, it provided her with a space for possible conversation without stepping foot inside.

It was time. Time to study her potential targets, understand their weakness and exploit the dulled minds of the drunk, common, folk.

She stood there, an unaccompanied twelve-year-old from out of town, but did her best to maintain the aura of a person looking for no special attention.

Despite the garish overdone interior décor, from the outside, with the sole exception of the thick oak sign bearing the pub's name, the place had looked not particularly dissimilar to most of the other bars on the street. The outdoor patio was primarily being used by smokers, – some standing, some sitting – whiling away their time. Perhaps waiting on

friends to join them, or just wanting a break for the heady sights and sounds of the pub's interior for a few minutes.

It was known, at least to Helen, that travelers frequented all sorts of strange bars during their first time in a new town, usually to meet the locals and find interesting people, hear stories, that sort of banal thing.

She wasn't sure if she would find a worthwhile companion that was headed the same way she was. A long shot, but, she had to say – based on her journey so far, anything was possible.

...

“Hey there, are you lost?” a lone voice finally broke the nondescript chatter coming out of the bar. The woman speaking had a thick, almost stereotypically syrupy, Canadian accent and looked... perhaps thirty-years-old?

Pegging the voice as local was easy but Helen had never been good at discerning ages.

First impression: her manner revealed that she was an half of a married couple, - easy enough to deduce with her husband standing next to her, beaming a wide smile. She spoke from the on-property side of the wrought iron fence directly to the solitary little girl she had so dutifully noticed standing alone in the cold night air.

“No, I'm waiting for my uncle. He's around somewhere” Helen said.

“Okay. Is he going to be around soon?”

“I think so.”

“Do you want to wait inside till he gets here? It's pretty cold out in the night and you look like you're shivering.”

“Am I allowed inside?”

“I know the bartender here. Come on in through the front door and out by this side.”

Helen entered the bar and properly took in all the visuals. The interior paneling was mahogany, with furniture mostly of the same color. Restaurant tables sat in the main area with nattering customers in them. Six-foot-tall stools stood in front of the massive wooden bacchanalian alter of a bar – behind which was a spread a vast array of spirits and serving glasses.

The bartenders were flaring, pouring shots and attending to the inebriated herd desperately baying for attention.

Quite a few glazed faces turned at the sight of Helen, a short and visibly underage, unaccompanied, girl walking in replete with her school backpack was not something they expected to see in this setting anytime soon.

She walked past their tables, avoiding contact with the many people almost blocking her way and pleasantly being left to her own devices by barstaff either themselves not fully

understanding of the situation or maybe just too busy to remove her or formally ask a twelve-year-old for her ID.

...

The happy married couple guiding her motioned for Helen to step outside onto the porch area. There was no empty table fit for the three of them to sit down properly at. And by going out to the patio, the move even defeated the purpose of letting her inside to avoid the chilly air.

But Helen didn't care, she was all too happy to already have another helpful face or two to begin getting to help with her mission.

With a few basic introductions and general smalltalk out of the way, the amiable maybe-thirty-something couple that let her in started bombarding Helen with the sort of questions she was prepared to answer with absolute aplomb. They were the loquacious kind, the kind Helen often hated to deal with. Needless talk simply bored her, always had.

The Hackney Carriage wasn't meaningfully different from pretty much any other theme-pub you could find dozens of in any major North American city, but all the same, the interior of a metropolitan bar was actually brand new to Helen. She noted the smell – not great, which she figured was most likely coming from the manky carpet.

She heard occasional shouts coming from other men and women around the room, and a few louder exclamations that were followed the occasional heavy laugh. After a fair bit of mindless chit-chat, Helen had somehow managed to convince them that her fictional uncle might have lost sight of her, and that it wasn't uncommon. She used her best faux-innocent don't-worry-about-little-ol'-me tone to assure them that she'd be okay, and that she had been in this situation before, successfully making it back home alone.

She made sure to drop the name of a budget motel she'd seen on the walk over, The Wayland Inn, as the place she was supposedly staying at.

The cordial nature of the couple was welcome, but their efforts weren't.

They were trying hard to make her feel... happy? At ease?
Helen couldn't quite place it.

In any case, the man persistently asked if she'd like any food from the bar, and the woman tried her best to maintain a conversation in a very mothering tone.

A common behavior among certain adults when precocious little kids were around that made little sense to Helen.

For she had, in her considered opinion, a mind that was beyond the childishness or triviality of needing adult care. But Helen was pragmatic enough to see it wasn't a big ask to make them happy by accepting their snacks and polite chatter.

Even if these two might not end up being any great help, at least they were kind enough to offer to drop Helen off at the Wayland before it got too late.

Chapter Fifteen

Helen awoke in an uncomfortable, unfamiliar, bed in a room with very little light.

It took her a while to begin to make sense of her surroundings: a small apartment with closed, tinted-glass, windows that barely let any sunlight in, a run-down kitchen with tarnished utensils, a hole in the dingy bedroom's wall that lead to an ersatz en-suite bathroom and a main door that didn't open and was presumably locked from the outside.

There was no one in sight, but Helen wasn't so sure there was no one around.

She silently took in the roughness of the room.

...

Her backpack.

Helen started looking for it frantically, but could pretty quickly tell it wasn't in this sparse, strange, room.

She tried the doors again. Still firmly shut.

...

She tried to put last night's events into place – the drinking crowd, the casual conversation, the couple, the snacks she had politely accepted. After she 'interviewed' a variety of bar attendees, she hadn't found a single traveler that was making the journey to the same place she hoped to go next – Glacier Bay, Alaska by way of British Columbia in order to finally reach Mount Fairweather.

Eventually, she had settled on making use of the maybe-thirty-something couple's offer to ride with them to The Wayland. She had intended to find other travelers there.

Her memory served her only up to that point.

A point that returned plenty more questions and no solid answers.

She remembered... leaving the bar with the couple... into a... tan Corolla?

Driving away from the street with the row of nightlife venues.

The Wayland? No – it hadn't turned out that way. This did look like a cheap motel, a very cheap motel. But this wasn't where Helen had planned on going.

Why and how was she here?

...

Because she had consumed a drink before heading for the exit perhaps?

Helen had accepted one glass of cola.

She should have known better.

She tried the blackout curtains that were blocking the morning light from properly coming in. The glass behind them felt awfully thick. A quick scan of what she could make out through the heavy windows revealed that she wasn't too far off the ground, but a twelve-year-old girl landing hard and awkwardly from even one storey up would certainly still not be pleasant.

For all the situational analysis Helen was attempting to do, she still hadn't fully actualized the fact she had appeared to have been literally drugged and abducted.

That grim reality was not leaving much of an emotional mark on her as if she had simply partitioned that fact off from the rest of her mind.

Helen utterly refused to engage with it. Preferring to seek merely an immediate solution to the problem of being in this room, - then perhaps she'd mull over the personal implications later.

Perhaps her apparent kidnapers had underestimated her because she was just a little girl.

One who had, admittedly, slipped up in taking their drink, to boot.

Perhaps it was only their first time pulling off something like this.

...

In any case, it was stupid of her to trust such an overly-friendly couple. Possibly to really trust anyone, period.

Anyone – like Helen knew well herself – can lie to strangers.

Why abduct her?

As disorienting as it all was, and as hard for her to fathom the need of some unassuming couple to kidnap a twelve-year-old they didn't know, Helen assumed it might be child trafficking – perhaps.

Was it that the couple had simply brought her to wherever this was because she was asleep in their car?

It didn't all add up, the possibility of spiked drink made her think the worst.

She might very well have been merely projecting her own deceptive nature on top of a simple misunderstanding – after all, a thief assumes everyone steals.

But for better or for worse, that possibility never crossed Helen's mind.

All the same. She wanted to get out quickly.

...

Already returning her mind to the window – a fall, she figured, wouldn't be too big of a hazard.

She could make it with only a few minor injuries if she could land well. But no part of this was to be easy.

She found no heavy object to break the window's glass with, no gun to shoot the panes down.

She searched again, every square inch of the room for any trace of her backpack.

If she was to do this, she had better do it sooner rather than later. There was no way she would be able to overpower two adults – or even more perhaps – if the couple and returned.

It was still a foolish move from her presumed-captors to leave her alone in a room, however. And whatever unpleasant motive they might have had in mind was about to be fouled.

With no obvious tool to break free and no conceivable way of finding her backpack or its contents Helen felt a rage inside her like never before. But she thought hard.

With few other options on the table she ran towards the bathroom and pulled up the lid of the toilet's flush-tank. This was the best she had.

It went through the room's antique half-inch thick frosted window without any appreciable resistance, - shards of ceramic and glass bouncing across the worn, carpeted, floor of the room, and down onto the pavement outside.

She now easily saw dozens of cars parked on the other side of the road inside a three-tier parking garage structure. It had made a deafening noise, the window crashing, and the landing of the ceramic lid, thereafter.

Thankfully, there had been no-one walking around directly below.

Carefully, Helen climbed out of the window, doing her best to ignore the few jagged pieces that still remained around the edges of the room's new escape-hole. This decrepit building had no fire escape, so she stood on the windowledge, probing her surroundings for a flag pole, a downpipe, a garbage bin, anything at all that could be used to make the fall shorter and less painful.

No luck. Helen took a deep breath.

One.

Two.

Three.

When she hit the ground, Helen bent her knees as she vaguely recalled once having been advised to do in the event of needing to fall any great distance. Her right ankle twisted from the impact of the landing all the same.

There was no pain for now, she couldn't feel it yet. And pain you can't feel might as well not exist.

She got up immediately and ran, full-bore, across into the parking area. It was a somber

place, dull and functional, with three equal floors – each open and filled with an array of cars. At the entrance, an automatic yellow-painted barrier shot up every time it sensed a moving vehicle come through.

Helen ducked the barrier and frantically ran on her twisted ankle up the ramps of the multistorey parking lot to the uppermost layer and settled behind the first car in a row that hugged the sturdy concrete wall.

The worst was over.

...

Still, adrenaline wearing off, a stabbing-like sensation started to overcome her. Helen's body collapsed onto the asphalt floor. She sat there and let out a wild scream. Slowly, she checked her russet ankle for minute shards of broken glass, and rubbed at it in the hopes of alleviating the swelling pain.

A few minutes later, Helen felt comfortable, or daring, enough to try standing up.

She peeped over parked cars in front of her, rest some of her weight on the hood of a silver Subaru with her hands.

Helen has waiting like a hawk.

A hawk with a badly twisted ankle hiding in a multistorey parking lot.
But waiting like a hawk all the same.

...

But she wouldn't have to wait that long, anyway.

Helen soon heard the blare, then saw the pulsating lights, of two Calgary PD interceptors.

These two cop cars zoomed past the other vehicles on the street, stopping just short of the entrance to the building Helen had just gone to great lengths to defenestrate herself from.

They were here, Helen could only presume, in response to someone reporting a considerable amount of glass all over the sidewalk here.

Helen had a clear view of the scene from the top floor of her parking lot.

She noticed three officers barking commands at one another, organising themselves into position, staring at the glass on the ground, then methodically making their way inside the accursed apartment.

The other cars down there on the street surrounding Helen were clear as daylight. From her vantage point she sat looking for any sight of the couple that had brought her here.

As providence would have it, a few minutes after the cops arrived, a all-too-familiar tan-coloured car pulled over behind the police vehicles.

Two individuals stepped out, one of which Helen recognized as last night's 'motherly' figure. The other, she'd never seen before.

And Helen needed no second invitation once she saw it. She hobbled down to the ground level of the parking lot as quickly as she could on a thoroughly busted ankle, – back the full length of the way up she'd come up across the stream of cars parked cold on each floor.

Despite her injury, she practically vaulted one concrete safety barrier on her way over to the tan Corolla, and immediately recognised what she was looking for inside through a window. The black-and-white checkboard pattern was very easily distinguishable inside the dark interior of the car.

It was her backpack, and within it, her money, her clothes, her documents, the Dezzzy, everything she held dear.

She snuck around to the back behind the vehicle. The woman who had apparently abducted her – and evidently brought her here – was about ten feet in front of the car, and too busy wordlessly staring up at the broken window to notice Helen behind her.

With no sight of her supposed husband or the other person who had gotten out of the car with her moments ago, Helen waited until she was sure the coast was absolutely clear.

She thankfully found that the back door of the car was unlocked, and opened it ever-so-gently.

She took back her bag and opened it to see if it was all there.

Carefully, silently, Helen dug through her belongings and immediately groped around at the bottom of the bag until she felt the all-important and cool-to-the-touch object hidden at the very bottom.

She was incredibly suprised – but immensely grateful – that her bag didn't appear to have been meddled with or rummaged through in any way.

Helen closed the door as gently as she could. However, the door still creaked weightily and snapped into the fully-closed position with a distinctive clunk-thud that was all-to-easily heard by the woman standing ten feet from her.

The woman turned back and stared in shock.

Helen immediately pulled out the gun, silently pointed it at her, and motioned that she should keep quiet, finger to her lips.

The woman stood still, mouth wide open, but not speaking and clearly shaken.

Helen slowly starting backing herself away from the woman and her car and into an adjacent alley that led through to the other side of the avenue the two were on, all without ever saying a word or shifting the trajectory of the Dezzzy away from the shaken woman.

A few seconds later, she turned around and started sprinting as hard as her body let her.

Helen heard the woman start screaming and begin chasing after her, but continued running the full length of the alleyway.

She had just reached the end of the passageway when, perhaps with no better reason

than adrenalin-filled intuition she turned back around.

And in that moment – in that flurry and fear and nerves – with the sights of the Dezzy cleanly pointed at the woman madly chasing behind her, Helen pulled the trigger.

...

The gun did not fire.

Chapter Sixteen

Later.

Endless fields, separated by a line of trees, lay adjacent to the road.

The cool breeze wafted around the pleasant smell of rainy earth.

The thousands of trees here had shed their leaves onto the ground in the Autumn just gone.

Some scarlet, some crimson, some burgundy, others just plain red.

They played dead now, and would for the few months, waiting for the radiant Spring that followed the slow beauty of the Canadian Winter.

Grey squirrels darted along the treeline, and the melodic chirping of finches resonated through the chilly air.

And a family caravan steadily trudged alongside the other vehicles on this three-lane road headed up North.

In it, Helen was now riding along with a holidaymaking family of three: a husband, wife and their boy.

Helen had now been in this caravan for over ten hours and she felt good. Remarkably good in fact because there had been no preparation for this - no piece of the puzzle that finally fit into the right square.

It had just happened, and it was most welcome.

...

In the last few hours, things had gone haywire. She was on the verge of probable kidnapping, possibly minutes away from malicious exploit, arrest, or death even. Her trip thusfar had been a very eventful few days.

But it was that moment of madness in the alleyway that had stood out the most.

As far as Helen was concerned, she had turned herself into a killer when she had pulled the trigger.

The fact the gun had failed to fire was immaterial.

Helen's intent in the moment had been clear.

It was a romance with the gun – the Dezzy – and her choice of vernacular that had played its part into bringing her here. But that was not a side of her that felt comfortable or plain made sense anymore.

She vowed to not listen to that dark, bad, side of herself. Helen wished she could just get rid of The Dezzy, but she still knew better than to try.

The gun was, coercion, intimidation, malice, and death all combined into one device – a chrome-plated cup of sweetened poison.

But a voice resonated inside her head: "You still need it."

Helen sat on that one thought for hours.

...

She had been in the caravan for almost a day now, subject to no further unexpected surprises or unpleasant complications. It felt almost like a beautiful family vacation that might have been possible with her real relations if Grandpa was alive.

Back at the dreaded apartment she had escaped from, Helen had somehow managed to beat the odds of arrest and possible murder by sheer luck.

Immediately after the gun had failed her and she'd been forced to continue her mad dash away from the not-actually-all-that-motherly woman, Helen managed to lose her pursuer long enough to snag a taxi.

She rode for a just a mile and exited at a busy corner. Paying with a small wad of US currency the driver happily accepted, she bolted into an adjacent shopping arcade, past the sea of shoppers that were carelessly strolling around the place. It provided for cover, shading her from the watchful eyes of the police who she imagined were sure to have started grasping the situation by now.

Helen beelined inside a kids' clothing outlet and picked up a new outfit as quickly as she could.

A cap, a hoodie, a different colored top and a new, bright pink, bag – all so generic they could have belonged to any kid around her age. Helen paid, again using her US currency which the store luckily accepted, then immediately turned back into the store to change into her new clothes in their fitting room.

Helen took a good long look at herself in the full-length mirror of the store's dressing room, slowly allowing herself to fully take in her situation. She ditched her old clothes and backpack inside a bathroom stall opposite the clothing outlet after transferring all that she needed carefully into her new bag.

Exiting from the back of the shopping arcade, she waved profusely for another taxi and within a minute she had one.

Getting in the taxi allowed Helen another fleeting moment to think. Her mind desperately needed it.

The taxi driver was surprised to see a little girl flag down a cab by herself. What she said next stunned him further.

She had offered him a bundle of cash to keep completely quiet throughout the journey and take her to – in her words - "a place where she could find caravans". He was hesitant, and more than a little bit confused, but the sight of the bundle of notes waved in front of him put any concerns firmly out of his mind. How nice.

It was about half of the total amount of cash Helen had brought along, which still accounted for quite a lot. And she had found use for it: as a covetous object of

manipulation, - much like a coercive counterpoint the more overtly threatening Dezzy.

The driver agreed to drop her off at the first sight of caravans – wherever that might end up being.

In the relative calm of the taxi ride, Helen rested her eyes in deep thought. There were so many unanswered questions: from the motive of her apparent captors, the desolate room, and the likely-spiked drink. But she put those thoughts aside for now.

...

Helen thought to herself about her grandfather's teachings.

His ways were unorthodox. He often wrote about life, his words seeming equal parts poetic and esoteric prose.

But Helen had no problem in understanding his meaning.

He had told her about the difficulty inherent to any life worth living. Of a life spent pursuing achievement. About what motivated and interested a person such as himself; his life's twists, his hope for a day of triumph. Something, forever a whisker away.

And in the deep heart of it, filled with tragedy and marred happiness, how the right mindset you put into action. To some, it may feel otherwise, but they pass on before they realize differently.

It is truly desire that dictates actions, and finding the strength to see your will made manifest.

But at the end of the day, your life is all determined by a chain of coincidence and happenstance so far removed from your control as to be unfathomable.

Luck combines with courage. It is hard to build courage, – but work with it, and one day, when you find happiness, at that moment, in that glee, – should luck be on your side, you'll wish life could never end.

...

Helen awoke to the voice of the taxi's driver.

He was pointing out through the cab's windshield, towards a line of campervans that were resting at the edge of a body of water. He had kept up his end of the deal.

Helen was thankfully far away from inner-city Calgary.

The place was lined with forty-foot-tall tall cottonwood trees that shaded the parking spots beneath them. The driver had brought her to an incredibly large lake, a beautiful and serene stretch of land with cool water gently lapping at the broad banks of the solid ground. An endless plain of water, a blissful setting that resonated a tranquility unlike anything else Helen had faced along her journey out of her home in backwater Montana and through Canada thusfar.

The campervans each stood at the edge of the sand, overlooking the lake and the setting sun, – itself now turning into a slight shade of orange again, – and slowly hiding beneath the horizon.

...

Again, it was time for Helen to put on her veil of deception.

She had firmly decided to be much more selective in her use of the gun from here on out.

The device evidently had no bullets anyway, her brief moment of lunacy in the alley had made that clear.

But it could still work as a mechanism of intimidation if push really came to shove, and that thought had stopped her from getting rid of it.

Helen got out from the taxi, and slowly surveyed her surroundings, studying the undoubting minds of the lakeshore folk.

...

Helen found her stride slowly rising in pace, along with the beating of her heart, as she approached the campervan nearest where the taxi had left her.

Right up until the apparent drugging incident, everything Helen planned for had, more or less, fallen into place.

Now, there was a strange sense of fear creeping upon her. Even in the tranquil environment she found herself in, she was scared. The silence was vicious. But she shook it off on the pretext that her previous incident had only occurred due to a lack of awareness on her part, and steeled her nerves.

Helen picked up momentum, her feet crushing the odd dry twig fallen from cottonwood trees as she marched in. Finding a new driver to get her where she still needed to go among these campers was crucial.

She had studied for this, – out of necessity, and to an extent, out of her own sheer interest in how people could be persuaded to help others even against their own best interests.

Helen loved to read all about the best conartists in history:

From the relatively harmless acts of Pamela Des Barres, the rock groupie who traveled the world using only just four simple words, “I’m with the band”.

To the legendary exploits of Frank Abegnale - these case-studies each provided a stepping stone for Helen, a real example of how to sway people to her will.

But still, for all her practice, not everyone was so oblivious as to see not through a twelve-year-old’s lie as it turns out. Something Helen had found out quickly after she’d approached the first campervan asking that they allow her to join them.

The first van rejected her.

And then the next.

And the next.

And then two more.
And it repeated.

After brief encounters with half of the holidaymaking groups, all of the caravans she'd asked had rejected Helen's plea to travel with them.

They made excuses. And refused the money she had offered. Some even threatened her. Some asked her to leave before they might even call the cops.

The thought of the police cars definitely scared Helen.

...

She was quickly running out of ideas, and out of vans and families to approach, and was failing miserably at finding a convincing story too.

She gazed around in every direction to see if the taxicab driver was still around somewhere, but it had already long since left.

...

Helen decided to approach the last few caravans slowly – with stealth, with cunning, with more of a plan, like a wolf approaching a flock of unaware sheep. This time, she waited, and waited, until she spotted the perfect opportunity unfold right in front of her own eyes.

A little boy stepped out of the second-last campervan in the row of them along the lake's bank.

...

Helen had been riding in the comfort of that caravan for close to a day now. Getting ever-closer to her next big hurdle, the second US border crossing – over the line separating Canada from the state of Alaska.

But she was sure she wouldn't have a harrowing experience now, not entering her own country.

And because she was in the company of the sort of people that would raise the least amount of suspicion among border officials.

This caravan was comfortable too. Much more so than the cab of Lewis' truck, and infinitely better than the interior of the tan Corolla.

Helen had gotten onto this campervan easily.

Not with the use of her gun.

Nor through spinning a cunning story.

But with a sly use of her burgeoning feminine wiles on the boy she spotted.

Helen hadn't needed to say much to convince him either, as he was already practically melting inside before she got a word out – shying away every time Helen's eyes found his.

Helen knew he was smitten, and she could make good use of that.

The boy's family was driving to Alaska, making occasional stops at landmarks and places of natural beauty along the way like the Glenbow Museum, and Ghost Lake here.

It was smooth sailing therefore, for a part of the journey that Helen admittedly had much less of a particularly-well-thought-out plan for.

A surprise in life, like she had stumbled across a golden lantern, and the genie that emerged had granted her a wish that she hadn't even needed to ask for, or even think of asking.

In its own dear way, life had provided her with a miracle.

She had seen him again after three days. Just three days of wild events and mishaps that felt like a decade.

The boy she had seen stepping out of his family's campervan by the lake was Ralph, the very same schoolmate who had offered her a seat on his tandem bike and taken Helen to the trucker's inn on the first day of her journey.

Chapter Seventeen

Montana.

Bose and Anna were still visibly high on the meth when they were taken in by the police.

It was that time of the day that breathed no happiness.

Hot, dry, late in the afternoon.

The air was thin and the inevitable was due.

They were long out of mental strength, but nothing they could say now under even the best of circumstances would provide them with a strong defense here. The copious amounts of street-grade amphetamine still in their systems would only make it harder.

In a closed interrogation chamber where most words bore no meaning and their reasoning seemed absurd, it was time for Bose and Anna to plead their guilt.

There was no conceivable argument that was going to save them. No lawyer could make a case for their exit from the interrogation room – doubly so because they weren't going to ask for one. They simply couldn't win here.

And eventually, when the high wore off, the noticeable difference in their faces, minutes after reality had hit them made the police laugh.

At the very least, after this afternoon's misadventures, Montana's Finest felt pretty good about themselves.

...

Presently, Bose and Anna Baronhurst each found themselves in a painfully bland room behind a table with three police officers grilling them intently about the whereabouts of their daughter.

They sat in uncomfortable cheap plastic chairs, silent.

Their minds wandered, not to their children, not to their legal situation, but to the thought of whether or not it might be possible to score more meth in lockup soon.

For the police, the job was basically over. And all they had done was respond to an anonymous tip they had received over the phone.

The call they'd gotten was just a simple report of some sketchy-looking activity in the neighbourhood. Honestly, it had sounded exactly like a prank call – the dispatch officer noted what he called 'the halting tone and dry wheeze of a lie made up on right the spot by one or another of the county's slack-jawed highschool dropkicks he that knew had little else to do but waste cops' time and smoke in the backwoods all day'. Although, he did admit he couldn't seem to recall having heard this particular voice before.

Police dispatch officers were indeed the sorts of people usually able to deduce such details from barely twenty seconds of a telephone conversation alone, but department policy was generally to follow-up any tips when feasible. And today, like most days, was

otherwise a pretty slow one in Glacier County, Montana.

An officer was called in to investigate the surroundings of the Baronhurst home. When he saw the door of the house already wide open, the officer tokenly knocked as he walked right in.

With no one in sight, he might have proceeded to exit the area, but when he started to recognise muffled screams coming from inside the run-down old building. With no warrant, but enough 'probable cause', – a term the inhabitants of the house thoroughly dreaded, – he let himself further into the house without asking.

With a shooting stance achieved through years of rigorous GCPD training and the sort of dormant hero-complex you oh-so-often needed to be a cop, Lieutenant Scott Canzer marched into the Baronhurst household very alertly.

Announcing himself loudly and clearly across the trash strewn on the floor and as he neared his point of interest: a battered door, only slightly open, - obscuring the wicked scene inside.

The screams were growing louder, and Lieutenant Canzer heard a repeating thud emanating from within.

Years of working out here in the Montanan boonies on grim cases with all sorts of often bizarre and gristly endings had prepared him to not expect anything less from behind the door.

When he entered, he discovered a young man, beating two middle-aged adults lying on the floor with the stock end of a rifle.

Once more, the officer shouted, making his presence known again, and immediately motioned for the young man to drop his weapon. With a startled, hollow, expression on his face, Helen's brother slowly obliged, transferring the improvised club to the ground.

But they were too much alike in many ways – Helen and her brother Anthony – and just like her, he was often all-too-willing to take a risk and was no big fan of being told what to do.

The young man shifted the direction of the rifle, and aimed its barrel-end squarely at the officer. He would have pulled the trigger too, but before that could happen, years of training for just such a moment saw Lieutenant Canzer get his service pistol drawn all too quickly.

The young man fell to the ground, three nine-millimetre rounds had perfectly pierced his torso. His clumsy move with the rifle had failed him.

...

The police had gotten something of a story out of Helen's parents.

According to them, the situation had progressed as follows: Bose and Anna were being subjected to a display of rage by their only son, who had reacted to his parent's constant intoxication and lethargic demeanor with an explosive outburst.

In reality, Bose had found out that his son was dealing drugs. A little bit of slinging pot to his buddies – but, hypocrisy and hysteria be damned – Bose was awfully enraged his son would dare follow his example and get involved with drugs.

And this disagreement soon escalated from a foul verbal exchange into a wild quarrel.

Anna had intervened, and within moments had found herself in the midst of the brutality from both sides. Their son had reached for the rifle, but instead of using it for any rifle's primary purpose, he used it as an object of dominance, not outright lethality - Striking his parents dozens of times at different tender areas of their bodies.

Seeing his parents live like this for years slowly boiled up a tumult of emotions inside Anthony – and it had finally spilt over into something no one in the household had ever witnessed before, or could really have expected.

The fact this fight was going on just as Lieutenant Canzer arrived on the scene was coincidental. But that is how things shape out sometimes.

...

There had been plenty of drugs hidden inside the house too, of course. In the aftermath of the fight Canzer had walked in on, backup was naturally called, and a police team had spent all night discovering it all and carting it away for documentation.

Bose and Anna were in custody.
Their son was in the hospital, critical condition.
And their other child, evidently missing, as it would turn out to the surprise of the GCPD.

Finding the girl was the Law's priority now.

The local county police would obviously need to call in someone above their pay-grade for a missing twelve-year-old.
This was an interstate affair, potentially international even – given how relatively close the border was.

...

Six-hundred miles away, the FBI field office in West Amelia Earhart Drive, Salt Lake City – responsible for protecting all 5,319,000 residents in all 315,000 square miles of Utah, Idaho, and Montana – had just received word from the Alaska-British Columbia border crossing that a girl named Helen Baronhurst had passed through not too long ago now.

Perhaps just long ago enough to make it that little bit harder to narrow her location now down any further than somewhere a short distance inside the Alaskan side of the border.

Chapter Eighteen

Helen was with Ralph, who was thoroughly elated at the thought of spending a day in the company of his crush.

Helen was happy too, but for reasons Ralph knew nothing of.

She appreciated him, and certainly liked his helpful family, and the care they'd given her.

The way she had used their help was unconventional, but relatively harmless, Helen supposed. But she couldn't have asked for more.

Ralph's family had started out on their trip up North on the day after Helen had embarked on her own journey. They were on their way to a funeral, Ralph's great aunt in Alaska.

Ralph had yearned to tell Helen about this story on the night she had asked for he and his bike's help - but his shy nature and the overwhelming nervousness of being with her had stopped him.

Things could have been much easier for Helen.

But, in any case, the past week's events just so happened to lead both parties to this exact moment here.

When she first saw him at the lake, – after she had gotten over the shock of seeing him, of course – it didn't take all too long for Helen to approach the boy and make use of her charm. Ralph tried to convince his parents to hear her out too – parents who were rightly skeptical of Helen's reasons. It was a very valid skepticism – for she had gone on to string lie after lie, each connecting to the next along a very thin chain.

Helen said she accompanied her uncle to Canada, who supposedly lived only a few miles away from Ghost Lake, Alberta. She continued to fabricate untruths more-or-less on the spot, stating that she was to travel to Gustavus Airport, Alaska, that very day for her trip back to Montana, but her uncle had cancelled.

She passionately faked a phone call in front of them, cleverly disguising her conversation to suit positive replies. Read: "Uh huh, yes I'll be safe, of course, yeah, they're traveling straight to Alaska, I have most of my stuff with me, okay, okay, okay, thank you so much. Miss you, love you, bye."

After she hung up, the adults couldn't find themselves a reason good enough to turn down Helen's request to tag-along, especially with Ralph's tenacious pleading. And like good parents, they loved their child so much, they knew better than to refuse his wishes.

Thankfully too, minors were allowed to fly on US airlines unaccompanied by an adult – something which made Helen's story just plausible enough to be entertained.

Finally, Ralph's parents agreed to drop her off at the Alaskan airport once they consulted privately amongst themselves.

Fluky fortune, suppose it did favor the brave after all.

And Ralph's mom and dad even started to forget their initial doubts about Helen's

company pretty quickly once they all got underway again too.

The campervan labored along the road, gradually leaving the tarmac and the autumnal trees behind. Helen was losing time, she should have been looking at the ragged mountain peaks of Fairweather by now. The Martino family was in no hurry as the funeral wasn't to start anytime that day. They had known that the end was coming for Ralph's aunt, and had made arrangements in advance.

They were on course, going steadily along the route they had plugged into their GPS.

Helen couldn't help herself but to keep asking to check Ralph's phone. He never asked why, but if he had, she probably wouldn't have told the truth about it and said that she wanted to see if anybody had filed any report of her missing yet.

But still, not matter how many times she checked, nothing.

Typical of her parents, Helen reckoned. Not surprising.

She the beginning of her journey, Helen had her own phone firmly off and even perhaps even over-enthusiastically shrouded in aluminum foil in fear of satellite tracking. Helen didn't know if that would actually help or not, but it was a risk she didn't want to take either way, if she could at all help it.

The caravan stopped at multiple landmarks along the route, and even though each one made Helen a bit more late than she might have otherwise hoped, she still let herself cherish the sights and sounds of each of them.

Canada. She took it all in.

The warmth from the sun and the cold from the snow combined together. The mountains that felt so close in sight, yet far from touch.

Helen had long expected she'd experience something very similar, amplified even, at Fairweather.

Very few made their way across this border and up the Alaskan coast by road – especially not at this time of year.

There were almost no signs of modern human civilisation around them.

Good. Very welcome.

Chapter Nineteen

One Mr. Lewis Plummer sat, parked, very comfortably in the same ratty chair in the cab of his Mack truck he occupied every day. Slowly and thoughtfully smoking another Marlboro from the pack he'd picked up as soon as he'd had completed his most recent job while leafing through a complimentary newspaper he grabbed passing through the drivers' lounge at his loading depot.

It was a morning of complete peace, all the more welcome after a heady few days. Only ever interrupted by an occasional whining of engines, those of the other trucks in the depot yard.

The uniform long, white, truck-trailers hitched to a full spectrum of cabs reminded him of the difference in the lives of the people that rode in them. Some were those trying to escape the ordinary nine-to-five job schtick, but other times, it was – almost paradoxically – those perfectly happy in the routine of running delivery jobs.

Lewis had finally decided to phone-in a missing persons tip after coming across something disconcerting in the local times. He had been considering it a while now, but a couple paragraphs he had found the time to glance over sealed it in his mind.

CALGARY, ALBERTA: An American girl, believed to be between ages 10 to 12, has been reported missing from a local motel chain in City of Calgary, police say. The girl, whose identity remains unknown, was last seen wearing a black-and-white sweater and carrying a similar backpack. She was last accompanied by two individuals, a woman, Ms. Jane Jones, 33, and her husband, Mr. Ryan Faber, 34.

The pair had picked her up at a local bar after the girl had allegedly agreed to ride with them to a hotel. "She wouldn't wake up in the car when we reached the hotel. We had to look into her belongings to know where she wanted to go." said Ms. Jones.

After checking her belongings, the duo claims to have discovered a handgun, among other valuables. They then proceeded to take her to a local motel in hopes that she would wake up in the morning. When asked why they hadn't reported the incident to the police, the duo reportedly replied "We thought she was violent and unstable. Our best bet was to keep her locked safe some place till the police station opened up".

An official investigation by the Calgary PD has begun. It is believed that both the persons of interest involved were intoxicated at the time of the incident.

Police have reportedly said that the couple's story could not be validated entirely. Upon further questioning, the pair allegedly answered by stating that they were "frightened to inform the police" and in their inebriated state of mind had decided to follow up the next morning. Today, police officials rushed to the motel and saw that the glass windows on the first floor of the hotel had been shattered. There was no sight of the girl. Ms. Jones and Mr. Faber both remain in police custody. Further details on the whereabouts of the alleged missing girl remain unknown.

Quickly-hashed-out, typical local paper middling-quality journalism aside, Lewis could gleam enough from the story to figure that the little girl mentioned had to be the very same

one he'd been driving with not forty-eight hours ago now.

Lewis stubbed his cigarette out in the cab's pull-out ashtray and closed the paper.

He was right. His gut was right.

Helen was in danger, and it seemed she had somehow escaped it like a champ, too.

He wanted Helen to win, - to get to wherever she needed to go.

But he didn't know how he could help her cause now, or frankly, what his next move should be at all.

After thinking for at least a solid minute, Lewis started searching around online to find anything at all that could let him help. A full name? Any social media accounts?

Lewis remembered the letter he had gotten from Helen, she might even have mentioned her phone number.

Perhaps her address was on it?

He searched through the small collection of clutter around his cab and found it.

There was an address. And perhaps even better, a phone number.

Lewis pulled out his phone and dialed.

He waited a good thirty seconds on the dialtone, unconsciously reaching for another cigarette to pass the time.

Failure to connect.

Lewis re-read the address Helen had left him. No clear way of dialing her house itself, though, he thought.

He hung up, opened an internet search on his phone for the number of the Glacier County, Montana police station instead, and dialed that next.

Waiting, waiting, waiting.

Another drag on his Marlboro.

Waiting, waiting, waiting some more.

The line finally connected.

Lewis quickly spat out that he'd seen "uhh... a couple of guys... who, uh, looked like drug dealers" enter a house as he quoted off the address on listed on Helen's letter. For the sake of making it seem urgent, he added in afterthought "Looks like trouble. You should get over, uhh, here".

Lewis hoped it might be enough to get a cop or two over to Helen's home. He might not be able to help her directly given that he was here and she was wherever she was in parts unknown. But it might just help someone at home put two-and-two together that the little girl people were looking for up here was Helen.

...

Elsewhere.

Helen's experience at the civilian entryway on the BC-Alaska Highway was nothing like what she had been through earlier. All the travelers in her caravan were US citizens entering US territory, and there was little chance that a holidaymaking family's entry would be considered suspicious by anyone working the border.

Helen was aware of that, and she felt confident enough no perfectionist border guard would insist on interrogating her properly, anyway.

She did feel nervous about the gun, something she worried would land everybody in hot water if the police were to check the vanity of the caravan's bathroom. It was the only place she could tape it out of sight, and fortunately, she'd managed to find a window of opportunity to hide it without Ralph, or anyone else, noticing.

Helen's pulse quickened every with yard closer to the border.

She needn't have worried, really.

The officers were perfectly happy with the answers Mr. and Mrs. Martino had given them. There was a nominal unzipping of two suitcases so that the two border cops inspecting the campervan could glance at their contents a little - something that would provide the officials the satisfaction of following standard procedure.

When her documents cleared with no complications, Helen knew that her parents had apparently still failed to report to the police. Perhaps their heedless nature is for the best, for once.

Helen heaved a sigh of relief once the camper lumbered clear of the border and back onto the open highway.

Her bones re-solidified and a smile reached her face.

'The universe had made it all right', she thought.

The worst part was over, she was in Alaska, only a few hours away from the airport.

And blissfully unaware of the true ghastly state of affairs back home.

"We're only an hour away, dear. I hope you've got all your belongings together and ready."

"Yes, I have, Mrs. Martino. And I really wanted to thank you for this, it has been a lot of fun."

"Of course dear. We've loved having you with us. Ralph definitely seems to like your company lots too."

"Ralph's one of my closest friends." Helen lied "It was always going to be fun with him around."

This interaction was a boring necessity.

She was truly thankful for them, but she knew the need to conjure false praise on demand. She was trying her best to keep herself sane as she got ever so closer to fulfilling her journey.

About ten minutes later, Helen finally checked her own phone for any breaking news.

She Googled herself, expecting her parents to be too self-involved to care about her – especially given her luck in getting through the border completely without issues – perhaps so much so that when she returned to Montana, they might just be willing to act like nothing had happened at all.

...

But that idea died quickly.

First result from her search for herself:

A old school picture of herself, under the blunt headline: 'Twelve year old girl missing from home, parents arrested , brother in critical condition'.

She found herself reading the report over and over and over again when the words didn't make any sense to her.

It was an incomplete report. The police had saved the goriest details for themselves.

She considered calling her parents, or surrendering herself to the first police officer she could find, even.

It was unfathomable. Parents arrested? Her brother, critical condition? Why?

...

Helen had something swelling up inside of her. Some very peculiar feeling. It was a hard emotion to properly internalize.

She felt little true concern. Really, it was more... curiosity.

All the same and either way, Helen knew that right now she wanted more than anything else to just get off the damn caravan.

Chapter Twenty

The end was near. It was almost over.

Helen was about to witness the fruits of her journey's labour.

It was enough to stem her thoughts about things back at home for the time being. Helen just wanted to finish her job first. Her changing plans now was not going to alter the strange events in Montana.

Helen certainly didn't know how, but it looked like her expedition had somehow landed her family in a state of immense disarray.

At least for now, she thought: so be it.

Helen found herself with no feeling about it, truthfully. No sorrow or anguish whatsoever. This was a necessary ugliness.

And this – she had convinced herself - was not the time or place to turn back. She was now within striking distance of her intended destination.

...

The caravan trotted up the Gustavus Airport off-ramp and wheeled over close to the shuttle ranks. Signboards denoted directions to the departure sections. Her second stint with Ralph was about to end. The gate number she had given Ralph's parents was fast approaching and she had a plan ready. It was finally time to depart the caravan.

She hugged Ralph, longer than he could have ever hoped for. She let out the words "Thank you" amidst the flow of his exhausted breath, then turned around and waved goodbye to the van's other occupants.

Helen approached the only shuttle presently there, got in, and demurely asked the driver what the fee would be.

She was prepared to use the last use of the money she had brought with her to pay for the shuttle ride up to the edges of Glacier Bay proper, but, as it turns out, the Gustavus Airport shuttle service is complimentary.

And this shuttle would be departing in a few minutes.

How fortuitous, in all respects.

...

Helen now had a couple minutes to take a seat and think.

If the police were on the lookout for her... if she was stopped by them before she had the chance to reach Mount Fairweather... it was a thought she couldn't take.

All that she'd been through would have been for naught.

Helen just flatly wouldn't entertain the idea.

She gently took out her cell phone once more. Helen wasn't thrilled about the possibility,

however slim, of a police trace, but she needed to know what was happening in Montana.

The shuttle departed the airport grounds without much of a conscious thought from Helen.

She failed to process the passing scenery. Helen scarcely bothered looking out the windows whatsoever. Her mind was lingering on what she was reading about the situation back home.

Not exactly feeling good or bad about it, but undeniably lost in thought about it.

Her brother was fighting for his life, and if he had made it, he would most likely be jailed instantly.

Her parents were already in cells of their own, – she always knew that had only been a matter of time anyway.

Helen's family, the unwitting string of travelers she'd used to make her way North, the couple that had seemingly kidnapped her. It was a different sort of chaos everywhere she went.

Helen couldn't help but dwell on that thought right now, it wasn't like she could do anything to understand, - or for that matter - change the situation.

Helen wasn't completely sure what had gone down between her family in her absence. All she knew is that it must have been pretty grim. Perhaps, on some level, they had even deserved it. For the lifestyle, the more-than-a-few-times a switch ever met her skin, for the childhood she had not had.

There were endless questions about her future that firmly remained unanswerable.

...

The airport shuttle zoomed past the snowcapped lands outside and towards Glacier Bay National Park and Reserve.

While objectively quicker and shorter - compared to the drive in the campervan, this felt much longer.

Outside the vehicle, the splendour of nature was a sight to behold.
Not that Helen looked.

When she got off the shuttle-bus, maybe another ten, fifteen, minutes later - right at the entrance to the Reserve, Helen hugged her bag tightly.

There were a few groups of people in front of her carting around their own luggage and gear. She followed them from a bit of a distance, making sure they knew nothing of her existence – and advanced up the path away from the Reserve's crowded entrance area.

...

At last.

It was right there, and it was just like what she had dreamed – although clearer in the daylight, no murk, no fog, just white in the clear blue. Helen stood silent, the great mountain perfectly mirrored in a small lake that lay in front of her.

The mountain looked tremendous – both of them, Helen smirked

It was a magnificent peak, over fifteen-thousand thousand feet up in the air. Resplendent.

All the summits of the range stood beside one another, like a white, pointed crown for the forest which lay beneath. There was a broad, lush stretch of heath in front of her, so full of color, like a fresco. So beautiful, that for a moment, Helen almost forgot to breathe the cool Winter air in.

She didn't need a camera or her phone to save this image. It all sunk in, and like a perfect mental polaroid she clicked the shutter of her mind and saved this feeling of amazement, forever.

She had made it. Defying her age and size. In spite of all the odds stacked against her. Against all common sense even. All on the strength of her own determination, a promise made to herself, and trust in her grandfather's wisdom. She had really made it.

With no small amount of involuntary or coerced help perhaps, but still, Helen knew to credit herself.

She made it.

...

She made it.

...

She made it.

That thought rattled around her head. Helen could accept it as true, but hadn't quite felt it land yet.

It was a strange thing to see in many ways, the peak of Fairweather. Having wanted it so much for so long, it felt so different now. Obviously, she could never go back to not having seen it, therefore she could never see it for the first time ever again.

Helen was happy, but still harboured an insatiable hunger to want more from it. As if that were even easily definable, let alone possible.

Abruptly, the feeling within her – a sense of achievement – was replaced by a state of unease and restlessness again.

Helen turned and made her way straight off any of the designated hiking paths through the heath and right into the treeline that lay to her immediate East, avoiding the bramble and the larger rocks.

Far away.

At least, far enough away.

Far away from the people.

Far away from the people loitering around the entrance to the reserve.

The beige-brown birch stumps and a carpet of shed leaves.
The sound of frail twigs and an occasional sun-dried deer bone cracking underfoot.
No path to guide her.

An untold amount of walking further inside the solitude of the woods.
Helen kept going and stopped only once she could no longer hear the distant voices
somewhere behind her.

Helen emptied out the bag she had been carrying all her meaningful possessions in ever
since her time at the shopping centre onto the damp ground. Three important things inside
finally saw the daylight again after their long rest.
The Dezy, a sheet of A4 foolscap paper, and a very cool-to-the-touch metal urn.

Helen sat down to rest her tired body, trembling slightly in the chilly air.
She began to gently unfold the paper, and smoothed it out against her knee so that she
might read the words on it.

These were the words that had made her start this venture, a combination of the poetic
and prose. Words that were the motive for all the courage she had gathered to embrace
what she had gone through. Helen read the note aloud, even though.

There was decidedly no-one around to hear it, and she likely could have recited it from
heart all the same - but, Helen began to read the note, and read it aloud, all the same.

And underneath this mountain; 'Fairweather', 'Tsalxhaan, "The great big snowy
one",
It's a thing I do not know, sweetheart. I don't want to define it,

Point to the happier things, the metaphors and memories,
Those that you may look back at, and you may think to yourself, "He lied"

But know this, my dear, that in the future
When you have lost something valuable,
That large fish in a small pond,
A thing that blurs everything around,
Just remember, don't forget

That when it began, when it all started

You were born with emptiness
And when you are born with nothing,
You start to collect along the way
Some valuables, some to cherish
Some that you keep, Some that you rid.

And with time,
What you keep the longest,
What you have grown this affection for,
The older it gets, the wiser you get,
You will eventually find it missing.

By choice, by chance, or by misfortune.
In that moment of hollow,
You will feel something.

This is rust, and flying dust and the mysterious

Chemical is its appearance
You will know what a mess it was,
And it is not perfect,
That it is with no direction, and no purpose.

That this is how it will be without that thing
The thing you've held on to for long.

So tread lightly until you wake

Wake to the joy
Of finding a golden map
To the deed you've wanted all along

And take it in
And I hope you will find peace in it,
Take solace in the complication of it all, because my love,

You have dug a jewel,
A cloudy treasure amid a storm
But a disguise of magic
For your best chance to find meaning in life may have finally arrived

Helen knew exactly what it meant. And for it, she was crying.

She folded up the piece of paper again, still crying, making no effort to wipe away her tears.

She made a small hole on the ground with her bare hands, pushing away loose mud and the leafy detritus that built up underneath these massive trees.

Helen picked up the metal urn and kissed it. She placed it inside the small hole she had dug, along with the paper and the gun.

A gun that had only failed to fire because of a jostled-loose firing pin, and not because it wasn't loaded.

But she didn't know that.
And she didn't need to, either.

Helen took one last look at the ground – her grandfather's ashes, placed gently beside the object that had killed him.

...

One night he simply hadn't come back in following his regular evening walk. Instead, he

had lain on the pavement overnight, chest oozing blood down onto the cracked concrete all the while. A probable mugging-gone-bad in a deadend country town with too- few hopes and at least one-too-many handguns.
So mundane in today's world, and so disastrous to the lives of the affected.

Retired Colonel Joseph Baronhurst's killer had most likely panicked too, left the scene, dropped the gun.
Hadn't even ended up taking the old man's wallet after all that effort. No witnesses. Case still open, no leads as of one year on either.

His long-passed body had been discovered not even one-hundred yards from their house by Helen's mother the next morning. Neither of her parents may have picked up a fully-formed meth habit yet, but she had evidently already been of a loose enough ethical persuasion to pocket the dropped Dezzy from the scene before relaying her discovery to her husband, either child, or calling the police. She had clearly seen no reason not to take it.

Maybe in the moment it just looked cool or valuable to her. It had ended up joining the other family gun – the Ruger .22 rifle – as an ostensible home defence tool and occasional toy for Bo' and 'Tony to take out for plinking target practice in the woods.

Helen couldn't imagine her family's tampering with the scene helped the police solve the mystery either.

Although, being honest with herself, she doubted it would have made any real difference either way – and it certainly wouldn't bring Grandpa Joe back. And it's not like Helen had gone running to the police herself to report what her mother had done once she realised where her brother and dad's new gun had come from either.
A moral lapse of her very own perhaps. Must run in the family.

All the same, the poetry, the urn, and the Desert Eagle were all never to see the light of day again. Helen blanketed them over with the same dirt she had shifted make the hole in the first place.

When the soil back in place, shading the belongings underneath the ground forever, Helen stood up and laid her eyes on the mountain again.
She turned away from the grave and walked away in no particular direction.