

Award Season

by

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SENIOR PROJECT ESSAY

Sometimes I write to think better. To organize my thoughts and make sense of chaotic externalities. To become more articulate, quit adding to the noise, and be less of a big vague mush. This is one of the earliest motivations for writing I can recall. From a young age, sometime in middle school or earlier, I appreciated writing essays because it gave me space to examine how I felt about and how I was thinking on a subject, instead of just swimming in feelings and abstraction. Whether it was a story or data or a historical event, breaking down something critically, in pages and paragraphs and sentences, was of the more satisfying types of assignments I was being tasked with at the time. This exercise provided one extra way of seeing a thing, and that is always cool.

Despite the pain and toiling of trying to be concise and follow form, especially on a deadline and for a grade, it's been my engagement with language, playing with beats and sounds of words and how they congealed, along with the compulsion to synthesize not simply an argument or message, but a personal meaning out of patterns, that made me want to create in general. First it was with the drumming, then I picked up the tuba (I'm kidding) and eventually moved on to "creative writing." What I can accomplish musically I can't accomplish in writing, and vice versa, so it's always been best to have both, though a goal of mine is to match the rhythm in text.

'Feelings and abstraction,' to give them credit, are also vital to stories, and to writing them. When I began semiseriously attempting fiction in ninth grade in the form of short stories, the plotting and critical breakdown of my intentions prior to the actual writing proved useful in

getting started; by laying out my tools beforehand and getting a grip on the items and ideas I was trying to work-in to the narrative, I felt I was maintaining an overview, knowing better how to measure the ingredients and season the pot. With short stories, this technical outlining process helped with structuring, buffering plot points, and even building a reserve of objects and setting details that might add to the characters or the world. However, this wouldn't necessarily drive my story.

I don't necessarily get on a stage and jam with musicians by pre-examining the technical and thematic substructure of whatever garage rock sludge we're about to perform, anticipating every section, measure and note of the song. As a drummer, I don't even need to adhere to a key. For me, at least playing live, it's about synchronicity, acknowledging and crafting patterns, following a rhythm, or even pursuing an idea. Being "in dialogue" with other musicians onstage, then it's about respect, being aware of what they're saying, of your place in the conversation, your own parameters and the limitations of your instrument, and knowing something about what it is you're participating in. What's the tempo, and how many large beers has the singer had? What's the emotion of the crowd here, in this decrepit strip-mall bar? What's the musical tradition we're operating within, or without? And so, it is with being an inspired writer who writes.

All that said, music and writing are just as well strategically composed. So, there's something to be said about balance in the creative process, at least from my perspective. I think something I try to do in my creative process, ideally, is to suspend myself (and keep myself suspended) with one foot in Order and the other in Chaos, without exhausting, losing balance and wasting time. Then, apply aftercare, rest, repeat. There's a great deal to be said about

discipline and routine as well, and as I've embarked on developing my senior project, balance and discipline have become essential.

For my senior project, I am working on a novel/la titled *Award Season*, which spawned from a short fiction piece by the same name that I wrote while at Purchase College in fall 2018. That story is about the brutal production of a new season on a reality TV show, in which fifty "Contestants," funneled-in from penitentiaries, yet obsessed with airdates of when their demise will be broadcast, are violently eliminated before the cameras by crew members who themselves are a rough mix of convicts and professional union workers; a rationed deluge into booze and narcotics enables the crew to commit their deeds and fulfill their roles, to perform without fully facing what it is they're participating in. It begins at the start of the season, right after a new, wildcard director (the Director) has entered, staged a coup against the writing staff, and formed a relationship with Helmut, a young low-level worker, called a "gopher," whom he takes under his wing and is killed by near the ending. Set in a camp on a 400-acre lot in California's remote Simi Hills, on the edges of Ventura County and San Fernando Valley, Los Angeles, the story is told in third-person omniscient. It follows the duo as they go 'off-script' and hijack the show's production, descending into destruction.

That's what I tried to take a whack at, anyway.

"Award Season" is a reworking of a story I'd written a year earlier at half the length, titled "Meaning!" Told from the point of view of the show itself, the first version is a bit sillier. However, it includes nuggets of things — many of which I'm still scratching the surfaces of — present in current considerations: the main roles of and relationship between the Director and Helmut, a reality TV show set inside a California death camp, the trafficking of bodies, exploited

prison labor, organized/“legitimate” state crime, average people succumbing to violence, cruelty in entertainment, degrees of an individual’s fanning of disorder, and fame as one’s last remaining American obsession. The original sense for the story came out of a cross between ABC’s *The Bachelor* and Christopher R. Browning’s haunting historical nonfiction book, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, and how I was having trouble breaking them down to myself. However horrifying, I felt I needed to understand the implications. Turning off the channel or closing the book immediately after completing an episode or a chapter, to go distract myself with something else, was an action that would leave me unsure and uncertain of whatever the hell I had just witnessed.

From this initial inspiration through everything that my story has since (been trying to) become, I am trying to synthesize out of creative associations some kind of personal meaning. I’m trying to incorporate reality into fiction to birth a coherent, and hopefully entertaining, narrative:

Set inside a labor camp nuzzled away in the isolated mountains of Simi Hills, in scorching-hot southern California, *Award Season* follows the brutal production of a new season of a reality TV show, wherein the Contestants, who are obsessed with airdates of when their demise will broadcast, are eliminated before the cameras in cruel and unusual ways by the crew.

This is the story of 12-year-old Helmut, a low-level worker on the show who suspects he’s being kept in the dark by the producers as to the true nature of the program, and who is determined to climb the production hierarchy in order to obtain enough power to escape the drudgery of his laboring days. He seeks to go someplace beyond the electric fence perimeter of his home, to make his way toward the ocean that’s rumored to be nearby and find some relief from the oppressive heat and toiling work.

When a stranger comes to town — a naive, flamboyant, wildcard TV director who stages a coup against the crew and seizes control of the production — Helmut is taken under his wing and, after hitting things off, becomes the new director’s personal assistant. With this newfound authority, Helmut begins to participate in the show in ways he never has before, while simultaneously reckoning with the dark history of this place, knowledge he receives in return for unquestionable loyalty to the Director.

Told in third person-close to Helmut’s perspective, *Award Season* follows the duo as they go ‘off-script’ and hijack the show’s production, descending with each other into total destruction.

Writing this story, and focusing on the relationship between Helmut and the Director, along with the power struggle within their relationship, has provided a pathway with these characters to confronting types of human behavior that are already occurring today, both onscreen and offscreen, processing it through the characters’ eyes, and carving-out a way within the narrative to discover some way of living through these horrible truths of our world and culture, of degrees of participation in production and entertainment no matter what the end result is, of things to escape into and something part of the process for one reckoning with their home, where they come from.

It is the first day of production on Season 12 of the streaming television program *Midnight Special*. Shooting occurs within a wildlife reserve-turned labor camp on a 10,000-acre lot of land called Simi, in an area referred to by the adults as southern California. Today's call sheet summons all active crew members to the set by noon to unload the Contestants from the railcars into pits, shake them down, hose them off, dress them up, mic them, aim the cameras at them and start rolling.

With hiatus now coming to an end, work will soon begin again.

Inside a cool, hollowed-out space of a long, low rock set into a grassy slope, Helmut vomits himself awake, expelling last night's bitter intoxicants all over his torn sleeping bag. Returning to the world, he scrambles around on the ground, cussing and tearing his call sheet lying beside him. The stench of this mess he's made is clearly not reminiscent of Asbach Uralt German brandy, his select drink of choice. No, this puke smells more like he drank paint thinner

last night, or the nuclear contaminants that have long been present in the ground water beneath his home. These toxic additives are used by the low-level production like Helmut — the “gophers” of the show. They would mix them together with the cheap wine that’s allocated and rationed-out to workers of their rank. Though Helmut, age twelve, is one of the older gophers working and living in Simi, he doesn’t see this as any reason for why he should be the only person here with good taste. He hasn’t touched the hooch since he got sick from it the first time at age six, when he had his first drink nearly half his life ago. Yet, that’s what it smells like now, and the smell is trapped inside the cave with him. The foulness lingers in his mouth, bringing with it that foul memory.

“Nasty,” he groans, spitting up the rest, along with some stomach bile. “Radioactive shit.”

He sits up and wipes his lips with the sleeve of a work uniform lying on the ground next to his sleeping bag. When did I pick up a spare uniform?

He wonders what happened last night, and how much time he must have spent in the barracks, hanging around his crazed, drunken coworkers, who piled up their rations for last night’s singular blowout, for him to now remember so little. He’s got pins and needles in his belly and a tightness in his chest. Ears ringing, his wrists feel rug-burned, too. Helmut blinks fast, then slows his blinking down. Looking at the newfound puddle of puke before him, a word ascends to the surface of his head-ached thought: *Ocean...*

Last night somebody spoke that word to him, or within earshot of him, he can’t fully remember. Something was said about an ocean and how it is, allegedly, not a long way out from Simi.

If I could get down from this mountain range and to an ocean, Helmut thinks, well that would be refreshing. I could learn to swim.

“It’s only a few miles out” are some words he remembers verbatim, being yelled over thumping music by someone he must have been drinking with in the barracks.

Was this when I had the hooch? He wonders. At some point in the night, a revolver was fired at a fluorescent tube light, followed by probably a hundred men cheering and then chanting.

Did I even find the brandy I went there for in the first place? Not much is verifiable, and not much seems to have been logged by his brain; just that he got caught up at the party longer than he would’ve liked, and while there, drank too much to have been accountable for himself; it’s not like anybody else is looking out for him.

Partying was never Helmut’s main interest during hiatuses. Instead, he’s had his tradition of sneaking a bottle of brandy from the storage room and running off to his hidden cave while everybody else stayed inside getting increasingly obnoxious and loud. He has managed to avoid this in previous seasons, but he has an ominous feeling about something he heard last night during this party. The thing is there, invisibly floating inside his brain, but the hangover’s not helping much in being able to think very hard about anything.

“Ugh,” Helmut’s belch echoes in the cave, “it better be here...”

Finagling with his sleeping bag, he leans over onto the cave floor and reaches into the shadows, retrieving a hemp knapsack, a mini propane torch and a white porcelain three-piece set of plate, saucer and mug, marked with pinkish-red stripes along the edges with an image of a small village on each. He opens his knapsack — and there it is: a half-full 750 ml bottle of Asbach Uralt. Along with it he unpacks a thermos, a brick of dark chocolate wrapped in cellophane, a cheese grater, a zip locked bag of sugar cubes, and a small canister of whipped cream which is a little warm by now. Slowly, he pours the brandy into the cup, delicately handling it in the dark atop saucer and plate. Dropping three sugar cubes in, he stirs the liquid

with his middle finger until the sugar dissolves completely. Next, he begins to flambé the mug with his torch as its contents swirl.

Having done this a million times before, and while still pretty drunk, he dazes.

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Light from the flame highlights parts of the interior cave walls; on them, painted figures and symbols, from where Helmut has no idea they came or by whom they were made. Maroon, charcoal, white and orange color; some strokes even resemble dry blood smears. He knows they are old. And he has his favorites, such as a pair of human stick figures wearing headdresses with lines radiating from the heads, a plant resembling a cornstalk, what looks like a rocket with a star inside, and a weird grouping of circles and lines with a tail. He has no idea what they're meant to do, but they are entertaining to look at, especially with a drink in hand. It's clear by the lack of vandalism in this cave that none of his coworkers in Simi know it exists at all, being hidden away among hard chaparral and rocky hills up in the Northeast corner of camp.

Since he first discovered this cave, Helmut has considered himself special, in that he may have exclusive access to this art, his interpretations perhaps being the only ones. His relationship to the art here is more intimate even than his relationship to the art of the TV show under which he serves. Gophers are not allowed to view the show itself; and while they make a living assisting the shooting crew, they're guided away from set during the shooting itself. For whatever reasons, the adults — or, at least, the show's producers, or whoever is above them — feel that gophers are not meant to bear witness. They're just there to fetch coffee, dashing about the grounds going for this and going for that like wheeled little machine boys. Able to smack them around for being a half-second late and not having to ever worry about it. It's a feature of the trade, Helmut understands, and he would love to be promoted out of what sometimes feels

like servitude. The relief, however, comes when shooting for each season has wrapped, and a new hiatus has begun, before the next one resumes the drudgery of labor in television production. Like the cave art, Helmut tends a uniquely intimate relationship with the land, too. While the other gophers hang out in the air-conditioned barracks, making hooch and partying, Helmut is out exploring the grounds of his home.

He was born in Simi, twelve seasons ago and has been living and laboring here in camp for as long as he can remember. He's been told by producers that where he lives is in a low rocky mountain range part of the Transverse Ranges, bulwarked on all sides by far worse, far hotter landscapes. Everything seems much too hot to be appealing, and Helmut, like most people who worked on the show, never left. Not that he would attempt to bring his body past the guarded hilltop outposts and electric fence perimeter that bounds the production site. Even the cute Doberman pups he is otherwise wont to pet quickly become adequate deterrents at the border. Testing his limits and the limits of his home and its electric fence perimeter, he sometimes liked to walk laps along the perimeter, waving at the snipers in the towers as he passed them from below. Helmut always resented being told things, and made to feel throughout his childhood, that he will always be too weak to take on the dogs, or the snipers. Like that, despite their many teeth or bullets, he has no real use heading into greater California anyway, for it's just worse there, and hotter, with more vicious dogs who won't let you pet them even when they're being good. He never went beyond the fences, and all he was ever able to catch a peek of, when a truck or train passed through a gate or tunnel, was more low, dry hills.

But there must be someplace beyond Simi, Helmut intuited from a young age. Sometime around when he was five, during production on Season 5, he saw the first new person, who wasn't a Contestant, enter camp from the outside. Helmut forgets his name but remembers that

he was one of the rarer types who wasn't born in the hills. The man transferred in from another production unit somewhere else in California. Or so he said. He came as a replacement for a camera operator in this camp who'd been strangled to death by a Contestant he went to visit on his own in the middle of the night.

“Me? I came from the ocean,” he joked. Helmut remembers this.

“What's that?” Helmut asked.

“A lot of water, that's what. The Pacific it's called. Biggest ocean in the world,” said the man.

“Do they shoot episodes at the ocean?”

He dismissed Helmut with a coffee order.

At that age, Helmut believed that the man really came from the ocean, like some kind of pirate. He always wanted to ask more questions about the outside world, the ocean, the rest of California, and what working on other shows was like. But he was too nervous to approach the man.

Other gophers, Helmut also remembers hearing, said they were visited by Pete in the middle of the night, just like his predecessor. Except this time, the mystery figure in the night was not hunting down Contestants, but gophers.

Never trust any of the adults on set, some gophers said, because they could all be bad when the cameras were off — After all the Contestants are eliminated, and there's not much to do during hiatus, many of the crew members get restless. This confused Helmut at first, not understanding what they meant, what they were too uncomfortable and embarrassed to outwardly say.

The others never spoke of what happened except the consistent consumption of booze, so Helmut never really knew what he was being excluded from. But that camera operator, Pete, disappeared from camp before the following episode was filmed, and that was rare too, unless it's the case that a worker is nixed by production — an 'off-screen death,' as the crew called it. That was the last time Helmut heard anyone speak about the ocean.

Considering himself better off on his own, Helmut spends his free time exploring the land. During hiatuses, when he's not serving the show for a living, he weaves throughout the acres and search for bits of history about the area incrementally, putting together the pieces. He could sometimes spend ten hours trekking the diameter of Simi from western electric fence to eastern electric fence, stopping only to nap under the shade of an oak tree. Crossing the clusters of chaparral, woodlands, grasslands and savannas, he roams among the foothills, rocks, cliffs and caves, spending time doing something clearer to mind and cleaner to spirit than the typical recreational activities of his rambunctious and teasing peers. Like Helmut, the show on which he serves is also contained to this lot of land. It shares in the climate and flora, the sunsets, those rare and miraculous episodes of rain which wash the toxic groundwater elsewhere. But this complex of chaparral, woodlands, grasslands and savanna is home for Helmut. It's old, older than he and the show. He can just feel when he's outside. It's in the rocks, and in the silence of the nights he wanders outside, alone, exploring his unmapped habitat and taking respite.

Visiting this cave at the end of each hiatus is Helmut's only meaningful tradition amidst the constant drudgery of television production. It's his only way to achieve a little drunken escapism, or a little euphoria, without having to participate in the debauchery of the other gophers and workers. This was about the only lasting tradition Helmut developed for himself over the seasons of his childhood. Between production cycles on the show he'd always served

was a hiatus, relief from the field labor he was otherwise plagued with, to steal some time back for himself, distancing from the loud humans living in the compound that was his home, out to some remote, hidden point on its vast acreage. Helmut, instead, prefers spending time alone, in the coolness of the cave, away from all the loud humans of Simi.

It would end, with the start of each new season, with waking up in the cave, having coffee, and waiting for the train to roll into camp near the cave and pass by, carrying the bodies of the Contestants through the foothills. Helmut felt special being one of the first people in camp to see them roll in. He always liked to stand before the rail which runs near his cave and try to make eye contact with as many of them as he could through the narrow windows of the train cars, tipping his mug to them from his safe space between the rail and the cave.

‘Welcome,’ he’d say, as if they could hear him. He is the only person to attend the homecomings. Sometimes, they would tip invisible mugs back, like they’d seen it on television already or read it in a script. Some would smile down at him like idiots and others looked straight ahead, while most were probably just so excited to be new additions to the show that they didn’t even notice him standing down there in the chaparral in his ragged work clothes. As the driverless train would whisk them deeper into his TV town, Helmut felt a strange connection with the talent that he felt nobody else in camp got the chance to experience. Under the low California sun and with his morning beverage in hand, Helmut finds time to share a brief moment of intimacy with the foreign cargo. Maybe the Contestants aren’t as *real* as Helmut is, as he perceives it, being just heads in train windows. But he wishes that those who do see him tipping his mug at them understand it as a welcoming gesture into his home.

He doesn’t know who his parents are, but he was told, just like the other gophers, that he was conceived here, in Simi. Through an upbringing mixed with uncertainties, rumors and jokes,

whether in good taste or plainly cruel, the largely unspoken general consensus in camp is that the gophers were born from illicit relations between show workers and Contestants. The show runners said they were forbidden relations, yet they acknowledged the need for gophers in principle, the need to have humans who can run around and be active, actively doing gopher-work to support production. The way it was explained to Helmut always felt like a twisted joke. Especially considering what this life pays. The truth is that gophers don't know by whom they entered this world through, only that the world they entered is, and has always been, this camp. The possibility of it being true has nothing but perpetuated a distrust of all the adults on the crew. It always goes unspoken, but the thing every young gopher realizes, either on his own or from another, is that anyone's father could be right there, among the men working on set, holding a boom stand or clapping a clapperboard or duct-taping cables to the floor. It would be the endless production cycle of a TV show which bounds them together, whether they can recognize each other or not. But nobody wants to talk about that kind of thing, especially when the reality of work is so overtaxing and in need of constant reprieve. From Helmut's perspective, time seems to be spent by everyone working so they can drink, and drinking so they can sleep, so that they can rise for the next day's shoot and repeat.

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After an incalculable amount of time, perhaps even minutes spent dipping in and out of a half-drunken daze, wherein muscle memory took control of the hand wielding the mini propane torch, the mug of liquor is now scalding hot.

"Ah!" Helmut burns his palm holding it. Dropping the torch, he snaps back to what he was doing and places the mug down onto the saucer and plate which rest on the cave floor.

Reaching into his knapsack he grabs a thermos, and from it adds hot, strong espresso to the steaming liquor before finishing things off with a lump of thickly whipped cream sweetened with vanilla sugar. After passing a belch that seems, for a second, like it might lead to further vomiting, it is time to grate the brick of dark chocolate over everything, scattering flakes onto the whipped cream as a garnish.

Alone in the silence, Helmut enjoys his first sip of fresh, spiked coffee as early beams of California sunshine reach the interior cave walls.

“Mmmmm,” sipping more, his blood alcohol level rising to a more tolerable level. He looks at the painted rock figures on the walls all around him. “It’s called an endorphin boost,” he says, raising his mug to them. “They say it’s supposed to help with hangovers, at least temporarily. This, though,” he holds up his bottle of leftover brandy from last night, “this should get me through the day. At least until more rations get in.”

The painted rock figures say nothing back.

Helmut takes another sip, getting some whipped cream on his nose. Slowly, he steadies himself to his feet and walks with his mug over to the cave entranceway, out into the light. Judging from the angle of the sun, it must be a little after 5AM now, which gives him some time to drink himself back to a functionally drunk state of being, relax and meditate before work. A few hours left to take respite in his end-of-hiatus tradition, before the call time beckons him back to work.

Looking out at the land, Helmut sees the thin clouds stretched over the South. Out beyond the foothills to the West, a couple acres away in a patch of oak savanna, he notices a small oak tree suffering through the end of a slow death by fire. Each hiatus, the show’s producers bring in

people to burn up parts of the land so that it doesn't ignite on its own, blowing all of the toxic on-site contaminants into the air and spreading them across the sky.

This tree is the only tree in sight that's still burning, though it's mostly smoking at this point. From Helmut's vantage point, it looks like a match going out.

Odd, he thinks; recalling that the prescribed burns were extinguished days ago. How did I not see this burning in the dark, last night? Was I *that* drunk? It would have been so obvious, he thinks.

But the sunshine feels good, and there's nothing like a cup of his favorite hot beverage in the early morning. He can hear music pulsing in the distance, bleeding over toward his cave. It must be coming all the way from the PA system setup in the barracks across camp. The rest of his coworkers haven't stopped partying, apparently. Helmut certainly remembers the amplitude last night, during the celebration: howls, firing weapons, shattering glass, that tunnel-vision looping, endlessly droning dance music they contort their bodies to and love pairing with diverse substance abuse. Either the music started earlier than usual last night, or Helmut got stuck there, for some strange reason, longer than he would have liked.

His ears are still ringing slightly, although that could be from the vomiting. He hates this kind of music when it's practically assaulting his eardrums; but now, now that it's this faint and in the distance, he finds this calmer pulse almost soothing.

Helmut stands now in the cave entranceway, looking out over the foothills of his home, trying to recall what the hell happened last night. He settles into the slow pulse of music, puts down his mug, closes his eyes, deepens his breathing, and tries to focus on each thought as it enters his mind.

Suddenly, a chain of motion-activated mega-speakers positioned along the railroad that runs through camp begins to activate, signaling the arrival of the show's Contestants. One by one, the mega-speakers blast various audio samples layered over each other; a cacophony of simulated oncoming train sounds — quite different from the sleek, automated train, which is actually arriving, and which otherwise generates minimal noise on its own as it glides along the electric-powered rail.

This ghastly chorus of fake sirens, airhorns and whistles sounding-off violently dominates the airspace of Simi, heavily insisting an unexpected start to production.

It slices through Helmut's meditation, shocking him back into the moment and back into his shitty hungover state. His attempt to process — let alone remember — what happened last night, comes to a screeching halt.

"They cannot be serious with this shit! Can you believe it? Unreal! Six hours early, it's got to be nearly six hours early," Helmut complains to the painted rock figures on the walls, heading back over to his torn call sheet and little pile of belongings on the ground, rushing to get ready.

Again, the painted figures say nothing back.

The train has arrived far ahead of schedule. If there's one thing Helmut is sure of, it's that this was *not* mentioned in the call sheet for today. And if there's another thing he knows, it's that he and the other gophers like him won't be compensated for the extra hours of labor. That's just how it is. The producers will punish him, no matter what, if he's late to set, because they've never failed to punish him before. If he's late to work on such an unusual day as this, he fears what potential unusual punishment he may be met with.

"This is insane," he mutters, unable to even finish his morning coffee.

As the simulated train noises fade from the mega-speakers, and as the silent train itself continues its way through camp, heading toward set, the opening theme song starts.

Like every other season on *Midnight Special*, it features one of the many cover versions of the show's titular song, recorded an incalculable number of times in all of its decadent variety.

Arpeggiated notes from an electric guitar chord are strummed slowly at first, reverberating like heat waves rising from hot black top, leading into lyrics Helmut has heard a million times before:

You wake up in the morning, you hear the work bell ring

They march you to the table, you see the same old thing

No drink upon the table, and no pork up in the pan

But you better not complain, boy, you'll get in trouble with the man

The line, "*Let the Midnight Special shine a light on me*" repeats three times, and on the fourth, the word "light" becomes "ever-loving light".

The train must be coming in on a different track than it normally does; also, because he can't feel it rumbling the ground like he usually can on the rail that runs near his cave. The other rail it must be on runs further north, near Simi Pass.

Helmut dashes out of the cave and onto the dirt path that leads to set.

He makes it across over ten acres in record time.

Approaching the set, he sees that the train has stopped alongside a dirt parking lot, parked around are several cars and production vans. A few crew members are already there, standing near the rail waiting for the automated train doors to open and release the Contestants. Not all of the crew are present yet, but those who are, are yawning, cursing, rubbing their temples and spitting on the dirt, clearly irritated to see the day start so ahead of schedule. And to complement

their obvious hangovers, along with his, Helmut knows for certain that nobody here will be getting compensated for the extra six hours of work.

“Boy!” the Assistant Director yells at Helmut from an oncoming pickup truck that crushes the shrubs in its path. It lurches to a stop in front of him. “Where’s the fucking coffee?” He slurs out the passenger side window.

“I didn’t make it yet, Sir. Call sheet says noon, but I—”

He throws a rock at Helmut, just missing his head. “Go make the fucking coffee and bring it back here, or I’ll have the producers give you a mouthful of underwear again!” The pickup speeds away, crushing more shrubs.

Telling by the sun, it is past 7AM already. Helmut doesn't feel any less hungover, especially now after dashing back and forth across camp for an hour, fetching the Assistant Director's coffee order. An hour for which he's sure will ultimately amount to unpaid labor. The trek from the TV set in the Northeast corner of Area I, around the foothills and over the toxic creek, all the way to Area IV in the West, usually takes Helmut just under one hour to complete. But out of fear of what unusual punishment might lie ahead in his future for not doing a quick-enough job on such an unusual day as this, he manages the whole roundtrip in near-equal time. Even with having stopped to vomit once or twice.

It's got to be one-hundred and twenty degrees out by the time he arrives to the set again. This time, he carries a wooden crate filled with dozens of plastic cups of scalding espressos, slung over his shoulder with a rope strap. The shooting location listed on today's call sheet is the exterior of a decommissioned missile plant which has become a common spot to shoot at in

recent seasons. The building itself is well-preserved and makes for an eye-catching backdrop — granted a little magic from the set decoration department. Plus, it receives great natural light during golden hour. Off the side of a dirt road that runs between the rocky chaparral-covered foothills, the missile plant rests alongside the railroad that runs through Simi.

Walking the dirt road back, Helmut pants like a dog. The worn rope functioning as the crate's strap abrades the skin of his bare shoulder with each sweaty pace forward.

From his point down the road he can see a black soundstage setup beneath an overhang attached to the side of the building, not many feet away from the railroad. In the enormous dirt parking lot next to that, there are some light fixtures out that look like somebody stopped setting them up halfway through, and some visible cables strewn around on the ground. A gang of white, unmarked semi-trailers are congregated around. Helmut sees the grip, electric, and what looks like wardrobe trucks, as well as the set decoration truck. Most of them have their doors ajar. The 'gennie' truck is there with the generator running, and the camera trucks are parked closest to set, but nobody is running back and forth between them like they usually do. There are, of course, no craft services available, other than a few coolers.

What Helmut does not see are the smaller passenger vehicles that were here just an hour ago, the Jeeps and the Fords; those are all gone now, leaving debris lingering around in the air over where they were parked and tire marks in the dirt road which loops around and heads west, in the direction from where he just came.

“Wait!” he shouts. “I have the coffee! Fuck!” He spits on the ground. Just missed them. “How the hell am I supposed to work with that? Somebody, tell me!” The hills say nothing.

Helmut is twelve, and he can't see himself doing this job forever. Sometimes he just wishes the show would get cancelled. He doesn't even know what that would mean for him, but

he would at least be glad, momentarily, to have it go away, or for him to be relieved of his duties which can seem so pointless at times. That would be a refreshment, he thinks.

Why is it the adults can't just go fetch coffees for themselves? He wonders. They have the cars and trucks, after all! They can make it across camp in a fraction of the time as he can on foot. They're not on their feet like the gophers are, all day long in the dry heat! This morning, Helmut doesn't understand why the Assistant Director couldn't, for once, act like the grown adult he touts himself to be, as all the other men in camp do when they have a little liquor in their bellies. Even in today's instance of being told what to do and when to do it — and with such rudeness —, Helmut doesn't see why that man deserved to be fetched anything.

“Ugh,” He pauses to heave in the middle of the road.

Now, he can't see the pickup or any passenger vehicles anywhere around set, nor the rest of the crew members for whom this coffee is for, and who should be here to help unload the cargo from the train. To do their damned jobs!

Helmut knows he's a production runner, yes, and that his job is to get people coffee. He knows that. And considering, rations are low, the heat is killing the soil, and there is barely enough for the show-workers to get by except for the constant renewal of the show itself. It literally must go on, keep going on for another season, and another season before the next. And if Helmut has a chance at baring witness to anything outside of his home — if there ever were such a thing for a low-level TV worker — to a place beyond Simi's physical borders, and beyond the weight of the production cycle's spiraling momentum, then he will have to get himself into a certain position of employment; something above being a gopher. He figures this, if he's ever going to have any real chance of hitching one of the trains out of Simi Pass. Maybe he can do it, one day, become a producer, or even a director. They get to travel on the trains.

But today, Helmut understands, he had to make this coffee, and now he must deliver it to the Assistant Director, no matter where in camp he and the other adults may have taken off to. Because that's work, and if he doesn't do work, he may just get a mouthful of underwear again from the producers before all this is over.

Only the other gophers are present around set, hanging around in the parking lot, spitting out whatever rations they have left of chewing tobacco. Approaching the scene, Helmut notices all twenty or so boys, idling by the railroad, kicking at the ground, standing-by in their roles as underpaid production runners being given zero direction. They're there with prop carts, microphone carrying cases, duffel bags spare uniforms and accessories, and coolers hardly full enough of drinks to hydrate everyone. His peers look like they'd all been in a drunken brawl with one another last night: bruised, disheveled, and visibly on-edge. He infers the worst of what they may have done to each other, or with each other, during the massive party. Helmut felt he had strong inferences and coupled with the rumors and counter-rumors all the boys spread about each other over time, he always tried to avoid it, to make his way out into the natural landscapes of Simi, alone in silence and a degree freer. Nonetheless, Helmut is already beginning to doubt that any of them might be able to help him recall the night before, or have any recollection themselves, of what happened, let alone what happened to him.

They're all probably hungover, Helmut thinks, But I guess I am, too.

Most are rubbing their temples, red in the face, knowing they likely won't be compensated for the extra five hours of off-the-clock work. And yet here they all are, back at it so damned early, the season off to a confusing start.

As Helmut enters the scene, he's approached by a gopher his age, named Nervous, whose long and greasy black hair almost completely covers his left eyepatch. He had some strange

disease as a baby, something he always blamed on the groundwater. Though at the cost of his eye, a pair of surgeries and some time off fixed him up well enough to get him back to work sooner than later. He is continually nervous about the sickness cropping up again, having never heard about any improvements made to the groundwater.

“Good morning, Nervous. Where did he go, the AD? Where is everybody?” Helmut asks, looking around the parking lot.

Nervous doesn't say anything. He's just staring at Helmut, grinning.

“What? What are you looking at?” He points to his neck. “Is that — I think you've got, like, lipstick on your neck, Helmut,” says Nervous.

“What?! Lipstick?! What are you talking about?!” Helmut rubs his neck all over with the back of his hand and looks at it. Pink smudge. “What...the...hell...? This can't be lipstick, why would I have lipstick on me.” He looks back up at Nervous. “That's weird, I don't know what that could be from,” brows raised. “Nervous, just tell me,” Helmut pinches the bridge of his nose, “what happened last night?”

“What happened last night. It was a shit-show, what else? I heard a few shots fired. I think somebody from the camera department overdosed, or got shot, or something. But it was mostly TVs on, music playing and dancing in the barracks. Why, you don't remember that?”

“What happened to *me*, is what I'm asking. I'm talking about me right now. Wasn't I with you at some point? Were we drinking hooch?” Helmut asks.

“Yeah, you had a lot, way more than me. I gave you the rest of mine. I kept getting sick drinking it, so I just finished whatever oxycodone I had left. But you ran off to get something, you said you were going to go make “something sweet.” I don't remember much else, but I think I didn't see you all night after that.”

“Something sweet...” Helmut repeats. He looks at the sky to check the time. “Anyway, where did the rest of the crew go? Do you know?”

“They left like a minute ago,” Nervous says. “The train’s been stopped here for over an hour. Hasn’t moved. Something came in over the walkie-talkies, then the whole crew hopped in their trucks and sped off. Some of the guys were saying they heard that there’s a huge wildfire about to pass over, but I just assume they’re fucking with me. So, who knows?”

“I don’t,” Helmut says, beginning to fidget.

“I guess the director and the producers never showed up here, so they all went to them? I don’t know, either. This whole morning doesn’t make sense to me. And with the train getting here so early, I’m getting a little nervous. They just told us all to stay here and wait. Wait for w-what? There’s a whole train full of Contestants in there. What if the train doors just open up all of a sudden?” Nervous starts crossing his arms and stuttering. “Can-can I have a coffee, Helmut?”

“Sorry, Nervous. If I give you one, then I have to give one to everybody. These are for the adults. You look pretty jittery anyway. I’d make you coffee, any other time.” Helmut pats his shoulder and walks further into the parking lot.

“Well!” shouts one boy named Jefferson who’s in the parking lot. “Look who finally heard the train and came to work. It’s about time!”

“Yeah, Helmut,” somebody else shouts at him in an even higher-pitched voice, “did you get lost again after sleeping on the ground like a fucking animal?” All the boys start cackling and pointing their fingers at him.

“I got here right after the train rolled in,” Helmut defends himself, “the AD stopped me and made me go make the coffee, so I left and just came back. Or did you not notice this giant crate hanging from my neck?”

“I haven’t seen the AD,” Jefferson says, getting up in Helmut’s face. They’re about the same height, even though Jefferson is four years his junior, at age eight.

“Maybe because you got here late, later than me, even,” Helmut says.

“Gimme one!” Jefferson lunges for a coffee from inside the wooden crate pressed against Helmut’s chest.

“No!” Helmut says, shoving him back. “So, I can get my pay deducted just so that you can have something that wasn’t made for you? No, I don’t think so.”

“You’re such a bitch,” Jefferson says. “Nobody likes you here, you know. Who’s your best friend? You don’t have one.”

This makes some of the boys cup their mouths and go, “Ohhh!” which quickly turns into mocking laughter. As if Helmut’s headache isn’t bad enough, he now has to endure the taunts of children.

His lip quivers. He wished the other gophers would respect him, for his seniority among them, if nothing else. He does his job well. If he’s not getting any respect from the coworkers of his rank, then he doesn’t see how they could have any at all for each other. If this is his company, he deserved to be in a better position on the show.

Helmut brushes past Jefferson and walks over to the gennie truck, placing down the crate of coffees on a table setup against the generator to keep them hot. The gophers seem a little more attentive, now that they can smell the strong coffee. They begin to enclose around Helmut and the aromatic crate. In the background, the train still sits on the track, engine off.

“Why you being such a try-hard, Helmut?” A short, corpulent eleven-year-old gopher named Candy says. “Let us have some coffee, man.”

“They’re not for you. I made them, and I know I’m going to get shit for it if they’re gone, Candy. So, no. Plus, I don’t think you need any.”

“Get fucked. Everyone else is gone, c’mon.”

“No.”

“Whatever,” Candy pulls a flask out from the elastic waistband of his shorts and takes a couple of swigs, spitting a fraction through his teeth onto the dirt. It smells just like the hooch Helmut’s been puking up all morning. He gags at this.

“What are you doing? You can’t drink on the job!” Helmut warns. “Put that disgusting shit away!”

“Yeah, well, I don’t see anybody else here,” Candy snickers. “What, are you gonna take it from me again? Are you gonna snitch on me?”

“Again? What? What are you talking about, snitch on you?”

Candy spins the cap of his flask closed, belching. “Last night,” he says, “last night you fought me over a brick of chocolate, nearly yanked it from my hands. And then you had some tall guy with a big beard come and steal it away from me, so he could give it to you!”

“Tall guy with a beard?”

“—Because you were too much of a bitch to fight me for it!”

Jefferson starts cracking-up off to the side, triggering the others to join in almost instantaneously.

“I don’t remember that at all, Candy,” Helmut says. “And I don’t need anyone to do anything for me. I don’t know who that guy would’ve been even if I wasn’t so drunk remembered what happened myself.”

“Helmut’s a snitch! Helmut’s a bitch!” Rob and Bob, twin brothers with some other rare form of cancer, similar to Nervous’, and which Nervous is convinced was also caused by the groundwater. The brothers start a chant, into which the other boys, again, quickly join, shouting together in unison.

Helmut feels sick to his stomach, to say nothing of the toxic booze still running through his system. These boys have no concern for the truth. They only wish to mock. They only have their catchy chants. He pinches his nose, wipes the sweat from his forehead, and checks inside his knapsack.

Suddenly, the automated train starts up again, engine rumbling idly on the track adjacent to the parking lot where they all are grouped together. The boys halt their mockery of Helmut and they freeze where they are standing, stunned by the unprompted activation of the engine.

“Oh, shit!” Jefferson jumps back, startled. “Is that thing going to take off?”

The sliding doors instantly open, and some grimy bodies in rags become partially visible, shuffling about in the shadows of the windowless train car, which has its back to the rising sun over the Santa Monica Mountains.

“Oh, fuck!”

“What do we do? What do w-we do?” exclaims Nervous, spinning and glancing around from the set to rest of the vacant lot. “It’s-it’s just us and them!”

From the darkness of the train car, Helmut can see the Contestants’ shoeless feet and unshackled ankles as the first things to emerge.

“They’re not all cuffed together!” yells Candy, stepping back. “Where are their ankle cuffs? Where are their fucking chains?”

The Contestants slowly begin to file out of the train car and into the shadow it’s casting on the dirt lot; they’re hunching over and covering their exposed skin with their hands. Other than them being unbound, the first thing Helmut notices is that they are not all as scraggly and decrepit as he remembers them being at the start of previous seasons. From experience working on this show his entire life, he is used to seeing all kinds of people entering his home; the old, the middle-aged, the young, but none particularly interesting to look at, at least in his opinion. Things gets monotonous pretty quick.

Helmut always wondered where all these Contestants traveled in from, though, which parts of California they’d lived in. He wondered why people who look so uninteresting are being placed in front of the cameras all the time.

Some of these bodies scrambling around in the dirt in front of the gophers appear to be much more fit and capable than the sickly-looking others. It’s as if some Contestants physically trained in order to get on the show, or something. Bodies like these do not make their way into camp often, Helmut acknowledges right away, even seeing easily through some of their thicker clothes. They have strong cheekbones, and muscular physiques, despite their filth from being crammed inside a steaming train car. It almost seems like each small part of their facial features were perfected by a sculptor’s hands, and from the rest of the head down to their feet, wherever visible, their appearance almost seems crafted by something beyond mere exercise and fitness. Something about them feels almost plastic to Helmut. He is transfixed at the sight of them. He feels his own cheek, then the part of his neck infected with mysterious lipstick.

As far back as Helmut can recall, none of what has transpired so far today was ever summarized in any call sheets production handed-out, not even the most recent one he accidentally tore-up in the cave earlier this morning.

It seems like the other gophers have never been so intimidated by the talent before, uncertain and probably thrown off by this twist of the agenda. They grew up in camp hearing all sorts of horror stories about everything — and everyone — outside of Simi's border, and how disgusting and hot it was everywhere else. Whenever the Contestants usually arrived in camp, and the gophers assisted the rest of the crew in unloading them, and getting them set up, they always felt as if they were saving the Contestants, participating in some life-fixing favor. The gophers would speak about how disgusting the Contestants are when they first arrive by train, and so broken by the horrible places they come from, that they ought to be constantly grateful for getting on the show, for being improved so by its production, in particular by their own low-level labor. Those stories the adults told, and which were retold by them, are all monster stories, from Helmut's perspective; though he doesn't care much for them, despite how effective they are at making his peers fear the unknown. Helmut doesn't care much for the way the adults tell these stories, either, as they are usually drunken and slurring their words when they do, pacing it poorly and repeating unnecessary bits of information that seem more like brief indulgences in hate, really, than anything else.

But with the adults gone now, Helmut and a handful of startled gophers are left to confront this unusual trainload of Contestants that now stand before them, clearly outnumbering them, looking over at them in silence from a dozen feet away. The gophers stare back, not knowing what to say or do. The sun is beginning to cover most the roof of the train car, which means it's

almost 8AM. Helmut sees a tumbleweed breeze across the soundstage, over the railroad and out of sight behind the train.

Helmut speaks up. “Step into the sunlight.”

“Huh?” goes Candy.

“Helmut, what the hell are you d-doing?” says Nervous, “this isn’t your job...what if the Assistant Director shows up? Shouldn’t we just leave them where they are, we don’t want them mobile now, do w-we?”

“Yeah Helmut, don’t start anything,” warns Candy. “What if these things just start walking around,” he says more in a hushed voice.

The Contestants look back and forth at each other for a moment, sharing confused and even amused looks, and then step forward into the sunlight. Helmut begins to count how many of them there are, while the other boys share hushed concern about what’s happening. The Contestants are all clearly drenched in sweat. Some of them quickly begin to vomit and go to the bathroom on themselves. Helmut wonders what it must be like to travel on a train.

“Ew!” screams Jefferson. “That’s fucking sick!” He picks up a rock on the ground and chucks it at the lineup.

“Cut it out, Jefferson,” Helmut says. “Stand down.”

“Don’t tell me what —”

“Stand down!” Helmut shouts, quieting him. Some of the gophers start snickering at this, and Jefferson gets red in the face.

The rock he threw missed hitting anybody, and instead has landed near the feet of an old man with long, curly white hair which looks mostly dark grey from what must just be extreme

filth. He bends over, audibly cracking his back and somewhat exposing parts of his body previously covered by rags and picks up the rock in his hand.

“Woah, woah, woah. Excuse me, there,” Helmut says to the Contestant, trying to sound firm in front of his peers. He begins to repeat the question, but the man opens his palm and drops the rock on his own. “Okay...good,” says Helmut, relieved. “Thank you.”

“I am just so happy to be here, Sir,” the man smiles back.

“Okay, well, great,” Helmut says. He turns to Jefferson, “Actually, you know what? Jefferson, you go retrieve that rock. Go pick it up and bring it back to where you found it on the ground.”

“But, but I don’t —”

“Go!” Helmut commands. Jefferson slowly walks up to the elderly man, cursing beneath his breath, and bends before him. Straightening, he looks the man in the face, disgusted.

“I’m just happy to be on the show,” the man says again. He smiles and reveals his complete lack of teeth. He then licks his gums.

Jefferson runs back, a little frightened. He drops the rock on the ground, stands back behind Helmut, crosses his arms and pouts.

“Now listen up!” Helmut resumes. “If anyone else has anything on their person – hidden underneath your cloth or up somewhere I can’t see – that could, uh, be considered a weapon, um, drop it, or you will be hurt. Really badly! And I don’t think any of you want to be hurt if there aren’t cameras here.”

“He’s such a try-hard! Ha-ha!” the gophers mock.

“Shut up!” he turns to the gophers, and then back to the line-up. I’ll do it, I’ll hurt you! You fucking got that?!”

Helmut tries to hide the crack in his voice, hoping the others will not hear his sympathy toward the talent bleeding out through his flawed attempt to appear harsher than he truly wants to be toward them. He is forced to hate the talent in front of the other gophers — in front of anyone he's ever known, growing up in this camp. He feels they were all so good at hating, even for no good reason, and Helmut saw how it allowed them to excel at their work, which itself called for them to treat the talent with disdain rather than decency. And he doesn't blame them, for it is maybe the only way they could deal with the fact of their boring lives and deeds: to assist in production or be nixed by production, every year on the campgrounds, every season.

An elderly woman standing in line speaks up, "Aren't there supposed to be cameras here already? Aren't we supposed to make our introductions? I have my speech memorized. Where are the cameras and the lights? Aren't we supposed to have microphones so we can introduce ourselves? Where is the crew?! You all look like children! And what are you," she locks eyes with Helmut after scanning him up and down, "ten years old?!" She spits in the dirt. "This is pathetic."

The gophers find this hilarious and use it as an opportunity to resume their torment. Even some of the other Contestants crack a smile, beginning to chuckle along at Helmut's expense.

Helmut stands there, embarrassed. If he wasn't able to hold himself accountable for whatever happened during the party last night, he needs to be able to watch his back now. He wants to seem tough, like he is able to do his job under any circumstance, but he just isn't sure how to act.

In truth, he often had to act to survive. Whether the cameras were on or off, whether a season was being filmed or it was during a hiatus, Helmut always had to conform to an extent just to get through life efficiently. He has to pretend he buys those horror stories generated about

the Contestants and the outside world; he has to get somewhat close to matching the level of aggression that his peers have toward them, out of fear. Helmut doesn't fear the Contestants — he wants to speak with them, to know what they know. But since gophers are not allowed by the adults to view the final product of the show itself, Helmut could never comfortably say for sure what it is he's participating in; what he has been of a part of his entire life. Working throughout his entire childhood, he still was never able to successfully act like he enjoys humiliating the Contestants as much as everybody else does. Humiliation seemed to be the tool of most utility for Helmut's peers. And when he would fail to convince them of what they might consider authenticity, his disdain of the Contestants, they turned to humiliate him, too.

He's not as rough as the others, in his mind. Always sensitive, Helmut finds interest in the subtle and quiet things in the natural environment around him, with curiosity of what else there is beyond his home. The other boys could not be more different, glued to screens and substances inside the air-conditioned barracks all day long, when not working. For these reasons Helmut has become an outcast among his peers, in a sense. And, despite the supreme surveillance over all their daily routines via producers who monitor their activity on CCTV, and via "snitch sessions" wherein everybody keeps everybody in-check by accusing each other and reporting on transgressions, they all have made their opinions about Helmut clearly known. He just had to continually act his way through social situations in camp, and in the workplace. Helmut found it best to try and do his job, as best as he could. To be a competent worker, if he couldn't be fully comfortable being a competent bully.

Helmut waits patiently for the laughter to reside, watching as the red sun rises higher above the mountain range in the distance, covering the roof of the train car with light. After a few moments he turns back to the old woman who questioned his age.

“I’m thirteen, lady,” he says. “And I don’t know what happened with the crew and everybody else, but you’ll have to be patient with me. Now, I don’t want to hurt you, but I will.”

Helmut hears two gophers quiet snicker behind his back. “Yeah right,” they whisper. “He’s a Contestant-loving weirdo! I bet he’d fuck a one of them if he had the chance.”

Helmut ignores this and takes his knapsack off his back, placing it on the ground. He slowly looks around, squinting at each one of the gophers standing around him in the parking lot, and then each one of the Contestants lined-up before him. He counted 50 of them. He sees another tumbleweed, this one over on the set, blown into a corner of the soundstage, trapped.

Helmut reaches into his knapsack and begins to fish around, clanking things around. He pulls out a Luger pistol. The gophers see this and stand back, afraid.

“I keep this handgun in my knapsack here,” Helmut says to everyone present, “and you have rocks at best out here. I see that whoever shipped you out on that train there,” he indicates by waving his pistol down the tracks, “did not bother to shackle you up. Those people, whoever they were, had a job, you see? Their job, as far as I can tell, they failed to do. Now, why am I saying this? Because, I see this happening all the time. And, because, them not doing their job makes it so that *I* have to do it now. And this pisses me off! Nobody wants to do their fucking jobs,” he yells, eyeing the gophers behind him now. Helmut turns back to the Contestants and says, “If the crew isn’t here to start shooting, then we have to be patient. You hear me?”

The Contestants quietly nod in agreement. After a few seconds of this, one of them begins clapping, and then another, and soon all 50 of them, healthy and decrepit alike, are awarding Helmut’s monologue. He can’t tell if they’re being condescending, or if they really are just happy to be on the show. He gives them the benefit of the doubt, as he has done so many times before.

One of the healthy-looking Contestants, an intensely muscular individual, suddenly steps out of the line-up, turns around and walks back into the open train car. Helmut can hear them bungling around in there, moving things around, but he cannot see into the shadows. After about a minute, the person steps out with a large coil of rope wrapped around both of their arms.

“Here, you go, Sir,” They step forward and drop a rope on the ground before Helmut. “The people who shipped us out, they left this inside the train. Please, Sir, tie us up.”

The train doors close, and it takes off down the track.

“Oh. Thanks,” Helmut says. He turns to the gophers and asks, “Who can tie a rope?” They all stand quiet with their heads down, shuffling their feet in the dirt. “Ha! Ridiculous. What is it you guys get paid for anyway? You see, I have to do everything,” he says as he picks up the massive rope. “While you all just stand there, scared like children, twiddling with your thumbs. Unbelievable.”

Helmut takes and untangles the rope and begins at the end of the line to knot the Contestants’ ankles and wrists together with great efficiency. As a gopher, a jack-of-all-trades grunt, he can tie a knot well, and he made sure that none of the fifty bodies will be able to break the chain.

“Are you watching what I’m doing?” he calls pack to his peers. “Watch what I’m doing, it may actually make you useful on set. Being a gopher isn’t all just about making coffees, you know? Not like any of you are good at that anyway.” Helmut, if he’s being honest, does enjoy being the bully at times like this, times when he feels justified in his own cruelty.

Helmut takes initiative and ties knot. “Watch what I do,” he repeats, “and learn.”

Helmut makes them stand there and watch him take his time with the knots on the ankles and wrists of the fresh talent, making them his temporary prisoners, and getting them away from

these cruel, low-level workers. When he finishes at the other end of the line-up, down along the train rail, and the sun has gotten noticeably more severe, he speaks to the other gophers:

“I’m taking the Contestants to the Area IV, to see what’s going on by the barracks. That’s where it looks like the crew took off to, yeah?” he says. “Now. You’re all going to wait here, like they told you to before, and like you listened. Now you’re going to keep listening, to me, and keep doing nothing while I go bring these people in and see what the hell is happening with today’s schedule.”

Helmut places his Luger back into his knapsack and picks it up off the ground. He walks back over to the wooden crate of espressos he placed beside the generator truck.

Suddenly, there is a loud horn blowing in the distance, somewhere across camp. It’s a sound Helmut has never heard before. The gophers jump, and the Contestants look around, not knowing what’s going on either. Out in the distance, way down the railroad tracks, is a looming, sharp, blackened kind of train shooting giant clouds of thick black smoke out of the top of it, screaming each time there’s a fresh plume. The vehicle has a pointed grill at its front that, even from this far away, looks to Helmut like some sort of evil, encroaching smile. How did this thing get into camp? He wonders.

Never in Helmut’s experience, or even during hiatuses when rations came in for resupply, has more than one train ever come down the tracks in this short a time span. And this new train is not normal like the electric ones that glide smoothly and quietly down the rails, without a driver to lead the bodies; instead this monster is blowing huge black clouds of ash into the open sky, intense sunrays bleeding through them. As it comes closer, Helmut is able to see how jet black the train itself is, independent of the ominous substance floating around it.

“What the...fuck is that?” says Jefferson, speaking up again. All the boys begin to get jumpy again.

“Is that the rations train?” asks Nervous. “No,” says Helmut. “I’ve never seen this kind of thing before, but it doesn’t make sense for them to use that train for rations. That looks more like a passenger train.”

“D-Does that mean...m-more Contestants are getting dropped-off? More than 50?”

Helmut finishes tying the knot around the talent and stands up to address the gophers. He picks up the additional rope and tosses it to them, at their feet.

“If it is, then tie them up. Just like I did.”

“But-but, Helmut, we don’t know how to tie those kinds of knots! Please, don’t leave yet!”

“Then you weren’t actually watching. Deal with this. I’m bringing *these* Contestants to the director’s trailer. You handle the second trainload. Unless you can’t?”

He picks up the crate of espressos, slings the strap around his neck, and grabs the leash at the front of the line of bodies. He starts tugging it as he walks away, out of the parking lot and away from the set, passing tumbleweeds. Back out onto the dirt road heading west.

Following the tire tracks on the winding dirt road, Helmut leads the chain gang of bodies away from the set and around the foothills, back toward the barracks over in Area IV. He hears behind him the second train's engine screeching to a halt on the rails at the munitions plant, from where they just departed. That second train, the most unexpected part of this long morning yet, is about to unload before the other gophers — unload what, Helmut does not know, but he's glad he isn't there to deal with that unknown. Could it really be more Contestants? He wonders. He almost wants to ask the Contestants he's with if *they* have any idea what's going on, but that would make him seem like he doesn't know what he's doing, and it would make his chains-gang of temporary prisoners more embarrassing relative to its extremity. And he knows he's not supposed to be talking to them much, out of fear of punishment from the adults, if they were to find out; he tries to keep to himself and just simply do his job. Or at least act like it.

He leads the Contestants around the foothills. There is little cloud coverage from the sun this morning, only some shade by the height of the hills.

Helmut's back aches from the wooden crate full of coffee and the knapsack still strung to his side. His palm begins to bleed from holding the rope leashing the chain-gang; he switches his grasp on it to the other hand. His mouth is beginning to salivate, too, and he's more than tempted to sip on one of the espressos sloshing around in the crate. The crew might not notice if he did — and if they did, do I really care after this hellish morning? Helmut thinks to himself.

Again, he isn't even on the clock right now, and maybe what the other boys said were right. Helmut knew it was unfair for them to have to show up to work when some crew members did so, virtually without any kind of punishment in response. They get to skate by with their mistakes on-set, and their drunken infractions off-set, all while the gophers suffer through every second of punishment laid upon them for the most minor infractions, such as being five minutes late to work, or arriving on time without the coffee being hot enough.

To Helmut, it's been starting to seem more and more like the system is sustained, through its lowest levels of power, by the work of the gophers and what they endure. It's the kids supporting the adults, and it's damned unfair, if he has anything to say about it. These adults — who themselves are late to work today — need to step-up and take responsibility, in Helmut's opinion. And although he and the other gophers may be somewhat ignorant to the pain the adults go through, which is why they drink so much, it still sometimes feels to him like it is the gophers who are the real ones sustaining this production. This entire show, and yet they have mostly never seen an episode before. They're the ones here, who must be on-time every day, while some higher-ranking crew members so often show up late, or, like today, leave set all of a sudden, without any fear of the kind of punishment the gophers would receive. And again, with today,

Helmut, feeling sick since he awoke, was scolded to go make coffees which nobody even had the courtesy to stick around and accept!

Fuck it, he thinks, grabbing an espresso cup from the crate with his bloody palm. He gets a rush of excitement, knowing he's breaking the rules and having it be so delicious while he does it. He didn't get to have his traditional morning coffee, after all, with the interruption of the train. But he now determines it fair for him to indulge a little on the espresso that *he brewed*. And, after all, he is the one who took some initiative back there, taking command of the Contestants and even his cruel peers.

"I deserve this," he whispers.

He takes the plastic cup, still hot, to his lips and sips, then sips again.

"Ahhh... Good shit," he mutters to himself.

Before he can take his next sip, the Contestant directly behind him taps him on the shoulder, ruining his little rush of euphoria. The person looks to be one of the oldest men Helmut has ever seen.

"Hello, Sir," he says to Helmut, "Might I be able to just have a sip? With this heat, I'm so dry and thirsty, and we weren't given much of anything since, since, since —, since before we got on the train two days ago. Might I," he gestures out his hands and roped-up wrists, "just a sip?"

Helmut says nothing, facing back ahead. He's not supposed to talk to the Contestants, even if he wants to, and he certainly doesn't want his superiors to find out he did.

Under no circumstances, ever, is anyone in camp allowed to break character in front of the talent.

But, then again, there's also certainly nobody else around. Helmut knows these hills, probably better than anyone else in Simi, and he can tell when he's alone, safe from the CCTV cameras wired up on certain facilities. There's nothing out here but wild animals, birds, snakes and such.

Helmut sighs, pulling a different cup from the crate, and hands it to the old man.

"Careful," he says, "It's still pretty hot."

"Oh, that is too kind. Well, thank you so much, Sir. And I'm so happy to be here, on the show."

"Right," says Helmut, turning to look ahead, as they begin to approach a patch of oak woodland. Now everybody's going to want a coffee, he thinks to himself.

"Excuse me, Sir?" A middle-aged woman sweating profusely near the front of the chain-gang asks Helmut.

"Please, I'm not supposed to be doling these coffees out. I'm drinking one because I made them," he belches, "—excuse me—, but they're not for you. They're for my bosses, okay? I have a job to do. Getting all of you to my superiors, along with this crate of coffees, is what I have to do, simple as that. I just gave this guy one because, well, he said he really needed it. He looks like shit."

"Fair enough, Sir. I would like to know, however, where is it you're taking us, exactly?" she asks him. "I'm curious is all. Anyway, this really is a beautiful landscape. I'm excited to be here!"

"Oh," Helmut says. "This road will lead us to a part of camp called Area IV. It's where my bosses — well, it's where the director's and the producers' trailers are," Helmut looks at and tells all of the Contestants now, "that's where their trailers are. And maybe the rest of the crew, for

that matter. I'm not sure why they weren't all there, still, by the train. The season usually doesn't start out this way. Are those chains okay on you all, by the way? I didn't mean to make them hurt, but I do need to keep you all together."

"Oh, yes," says the woman, "they feel fine, great!"

A Contestant in the back of the chain-gang with a gruff voice, shouts, "What? Is he saying something up there? I can't hear him at all from back here. Hey! Speak louder, kid!"

A Contestant in the front of the row relays the man's concern. "I don't think they can all hear you back there, Sir."

"Right," says Helmut again. "Can you do something for me, then? Just pass what I say down the line. I have such a headache and don't wish to keep shouting."

"Absolutely, Sir. It's great to be here." The man starts the game of telephone all the way down the chain-gang, while the man in the back is still audibly confused, asking those around him what's happening.

"Thank you," says Helmut. "And, um, I'm just wondering: Do you all receive scripts before you come on the show?"

"We do," he answers. "But I have to say, none of this was in the script I received. We weren't supposed to even arrive here until, I believe, what was it, noon?"

The Contestants around start agreeing and nodding with burrowed brows and chin rubbing:

"Yeah, yeah, it said noon."

"This is way earlier than it was supposed to be."

"I thought we were just making a stop, here."

Helmut rubs his chin and thinks. He was too drunk last night when he must have received his call sheet, and after tearing it up inside the cave this morning, he actually cannot remember anything else from the call sheet except for that the call time *was* supposed to be noon.

“Right,” Helmut says.”

“Very strange,” one of them repeats, “but it is ultimately great to be here, nonetheless!”

“Yes!” a Contestant marching just behind Helmut echoes, also drenched. “It is so great to be on the show! This is Season 12 of *Midnight Special*, correct?”

Helmut looks back ahead, thinking, walking, tugging on the rope, massaging his temple with his hand, mixing blood and sweat, and probably even last night’s liquor excreting from his skin pores. He ignores the talent and shifts his attention to another sip of coffee. Can’t these people feel how hot it is, and how hungover he most definitely looks? First, his tradition was cut-off by the early arrival of the train; then, he wasted an hour and his own energy fetching coffees for the crew who abandoned the set; and now he’s forced to make conversation with these people against his own anxieties regarding how forbidden it is.

But, it’s surely past 10AM now, and it’s not getting any cooler out.

The man and the woman beside him share a funny look, before turning back to Helmut after a few moments of silence.

“I’m Brent, and this is my wife, Brenda. I’m an accountant and so is she. Or, we were. May I ask your name, Sir?”

Again, Helmut stays quiet. Sips.

“Well, uh, we’re both so happy to be here and all.”

“What’s the matter,” Brenda asks her husband, “he doesn’t feel like talking to us? Why?”

“Ha-ha,” Brent laughs, “I get it. It’s hot, and it’s early. It would just be nice to know the name of the gentleman pulling the rope tied to our limbs, is all.”

“I’m Helmut.”

“Ah!” goes Brent, looking surprised at his wife. “How long have you been working here?”

“I’ve always been here. I live here.”

“Oh? Well. Our nephew, he’s probably about your age. My wife and I, well, we became legal guardians to him ten years ago, after a really nasty wildfire burned down his house. We were babysitting him, you know, at our house, to give my wife’s sister and her husband some personal space.”

“I—Listen man, I have such a headache. I just want to enjoy this coffee. Let’s just keep walking. There’s such beautiful flora around, even if it’s hard to find. Why don’t we just keep our mouths shut, eyes open, and be on the lookout for some rodents, or birds or whatever?”

“You see, the parents were both sex addicts,” he continues, “and they asked us to babysit their son all the time, it started to seem like. The night when the house burned down, they were home, inside, you know... Can you believe it? The firefighters said it started with a candle they must have lit downstairs, and that they probably couldn’t make it out of their upstairs bedroom in time, but I just bet you that they just couldn’t stop, you know...enough to mind the smoke alarms! They probably passed out midway because of the fumes. Anyway, our nephew lost them and the house that day. We just felt that we had to take him in.”

“All the orphan shelters in California are corrupt,” Brenda chimes in.

“That’s right,” her husband agrees. “Truth is, we never really wanted our nephew around, not all the time, like that! But we couldn’t in good faith give him up to the authorities.”

Helmut asks, actually turning his head around now. He looks them directly in the eyes for the first time since they unloaded from the train, and he sees how incredibly bloodshot the man's eyes are. Helmut looks around to all of them in close proximity, and most of them look even worse. Brenda's eyes are like some shade of purple, too. "What's an orphan shelter?" Helmut asks her.

"Well," says Brenda, "kids who lose their parents go there. Kids who are out on their own. The problem is that there's been a million cases where these kids just get treated worse at these places than you'd think they would out on the streets. It's a real shame, and so we took our nephew in."

"Yes," Brent continues. "But he was deep into drugs and drinking and all of those terrible crimes, since even while his parents were alive — probably because of them, we think. My wife and I rarely have wine! We get by! Anyway, our nephew passed on about a year ago, and I tell you, Helmut, the amount of love and sympathy we received from the people around us," Brent closes his eyes, puckers his lips and raises his hand into an OK sign, "it was...it was just so great. So great that it — it's just that, after a while, all that attention fades, you know? You know how things fade?"

"Things certainly fade," echoes Brenda.

"And we were left alone, on our own again, just my wife and me. People stopped calling our phones, stopped tagging us online, stopped sending chocolates and flowers. They stopped pampering us, Helmut. It all just, faded away."

"Yes," says Brenda, looking at her shoeless feet. "We received so much sympathy and attention the year after our nephew died that it...became how we got by. It became how we *got*

off, even, in not the proudest of ways. And when it started to die down, began fading, there was a withdrawal, which seems has not ended!” The couple laughs.

“We came on the show,” she continues, “because everything else we tried — therapy, prescriptions, even trying to raise awareness about the abuse in the orphan shelters, in the hopes that somebody would see our virtuous work and commend us for it. None of that worked in the end. Nothing seemed to work in matching that wave of attention.”

“So, we thought we’d give this experience a shot,” Brent explains.

“You’re here for attention?” Helmut asks, rubbing sweat from his forehead.

“Well, that’s one way of saying it!” The couple laughs some more. This time they kiss.

Helmut doesn’t even know what to say in response. He’s pretty disgusted by the whole thing. “That’s quite a story,” is what he comes up with. He sips on more espresso.

“What about you? What is it like in Simi?” asks Brent.

“It’s pronounced ‘*Shi-miyi*,’ not ‘*SEE-me*,’” says Helmut. “This patchwork of chaparral, woodlands, grasslands, savanna and desert is my home. It’s old, older than me and the show. Nobody ever told me this as fact. It’s just something I can feel when I’m outside — really outside. Getting my hands dirty. Like this.”

He looks glances about his surroundings, continuing, “It’s in the rocks, and in the silence of the nights I spend out here alone, exploring this unmapped place and taking respite in it — as much as I can, anyway. *Shi-miyi*.”

*

Helmut always felt proud, appearing to be the only person in this entire place who even knows the oldest pronunciation of the landmass that rests beneath their feet, and which far

precedes them all: *Shi-miyi*. One of the relatively few things Helmut learned on the Internet that excited him.

“It means little wind cloud,” he’d often inform his coworkers. “You know those slender, thread-like clouds that sometimes stretch south over the valley in autumn? *Shi-miyi*.”

They would laugh him off or kick him in the back of the knee, buckling him as a joke.

“What, are you, fucking drunk, dumbass?”

“Fuck-off about the past, Helmut. Nobody cares.”

With a compulsion to reiterate this basic fact of the land, which must be known somewhere else in the world as fact but not here, it’s frustrating when so many of them just say it any way they want to! It seemed so condescending to the reality of things. If he had his way, he’d make them all pronounce it correctly. But he’s not in charge. He’s just a damned gopher, unprompted and chained by his age to the bottom of the production ranks. But he understands—with ‘SEE-me’ as the consensus on how people of his home speak its name — that this old way of speaking he harps on so is likely gone for good. Yet, he still sometimes becomes irate upon hearing careless crew members, knowingly or not, from gophers all the way up to directors, broadly disrespect the only place he’s ever known by misplacing emphasis on the first syllable rather than the last. ‘SEE-me.’ He hates how it sounds, but he accepts it.

*

“Anyway, well, I work here, if that’s what you mean. This place is my home.”

“Oh, I can see that,” says Brent, “but what is it like, your job, I mean? How involved are you in the production of *Midnight Special*? Oh! Do they ever let you contribute creative ideas?! Like episode ideas? Oh, that must be wonderful!”

“No,” Helmut laughs. He takes another sip of espresso. “I’m a production runner. It’s funny, because I — well, me and the other gophers — we assist in almost every aspect of the show, running back and forth between almost every department. We’re making everybody coffee every day, and even helping to organize and process Contestants like you. Yet we are, more or less, kept on a need-to-know basis, *by* everyone. I never get to really know what goes on in one part of the show or another all that much. It’s more like, a little bit, everywhere.”

“Well, that sounds nice,” smiles Brenda. “I bet you make delicious coffee!”

“I actually kind of do,” Helmut says. “Thank you for that.”

“Wonderful,” she says. “And you made those?” she points to the crate pressed against his chest.

He nods.

“Could I please have one? I’d love to taste it!”

Helmut, once again, obliges with a big sigh.

“Thank you so much, Helmut!” Brenda smiles back. “So great to be here.” She begins to drink. “And, delicious!” Another few sips. “And so how is the work/life balance? Do you get enough time for ‘self-care’? Brent and I used to try that, ‘self-care,’ in therapy for a while. Didn’t work for us for very long, no...but we’ve heard it works for many others. Helps to de-stress the body. And it’s found to be especially useful for folks who have stress at work, or who just don’t feel like they’re getting enough reward out of their jobs, or their lives.”

“I don’t know what ‘self-care’ is, lady,” says Helmut. “I don’t get much time off, though, if that’s what you’re talking about. It feels like the production cycle here never ends, between six months of intensive shooting and six months of hiatus, all season round.” Sips.

“But, of course,” he continues, “me and the rest of the production runners are basically still doing our jobs: making coffee every morning, helping in the kitchens, cleaning the barracks, general tasks and all that. You see, the main thing that goes on here, in camp, is *Midnight Special* — it’s being shot during half the year, outside on the grounds. And then the other half of the year is spent, simultaneously, doing the post-production, as well as the pre-production for the next season to come. They have different people — different crews working on each phase of production — but we gophers are the ones who dash about from one to the other, between them all. A little bit of everything. We sort of see a little bit of everything that goes on, but we’re never given too many details about any specific facet of the show. At least that’s how it feels to me.”

“What about the other, um, ‘gophers’, as you call them?” asks Brent.

“Sometimes I think they don’t even care. Like they’re perfectly content with the situation, as long as they get their fix from whatever thing they’re obsessed with that moment. They get by just fine on their rations,” says Helmut. “And at the end of the day they get a personal screen to lose themselves in, for hours. But if you ask me, we barely get enough rations shipped in for anybody to have quality recreational time. All they do is nothing, except for intoxicating themselves with hooch or assaulting each other for sport. For me, I try to spend my youth exploring the outdoors alone, getting a feel for this land. It’s where I live, but it’s still mysterious. I’m not sure if that makes any sense...”

“What do you do when you aren’t working at all, though? During those hours at the end of the day?”

“After work, I usually fill up my knapsack with sweets, grab a flashlight and, well, just go exploring the grounds, here.”

Helmut points to the dirt path he's leading the chain-gang upon. "I can walk this path without a flashlight though; I've done it so many times, I know it by heart. I could do this with my eyes closed. And during hiatuses, on one of the nights when I really have nothing to do for work the next day, I grab a bottle of brandy, make my way out here, into the chaparral, into the grasslands, the savanna, wherever, and relax under the stars. It's my little tradition, here in Simi. And I get to do it, on those lucky nights, alone, quietly. But that's just me, I guess."

Helmut looks up to the sky, taking another sip of espresso.

"That's so lovely," Brenda says to Brent.

It is crazy, Helmut thinks again, that he wasn't even supposed to start working until another four hours from now. Though, if he were working, he wouldn't be able to consume this caffeine.

Plus, he's never really gotten the chance to speak with the Contestants before. They are certainly not as terrifying as all the stories painted them out to be — though Helmut always intuited this.

He figures he should embrace this moment and try to find out something about the outside world, about where they come from. He is curious about where they came from on the outside, and about what the show means to them.

"Where is everyone else from?" He suggests, just sort of throwing something out there waiting for any Contestant to bite.

A man who looks to be in his early thirties speaks up. "I dodged an extended prison sentence coming here," he says. "My lawyer told me about this thing I could sign-up for, something she said she was able to work out with the district judge, something that would get me off. Told me it was sort of like community service but on TV. All the roleplaying and shit. I

couldn't be doing nothing worse with myself than sitting on the couch all day, watching TV, so I signed up.”

Some of the other Contestants start to become chatty among themselves, now. It seems to Helmut like they probably kept complete silence during the train-car ride, and they must have not opened their mouths until they began interacting with him, being all polite and subservient. It felt kind of nice, in retrospect, though they now are beginning to turn their attention and voices to their fellow Contestants standing nearest them.

One woman near the back of the chain-gang who sounds like she spent her life smoking cigarettes begins to go on a rant that Helmut, even though he tries, cannot completely ignore, save for the rest of the humming conversations.

“California, this state, this state,” she hollers, “it’s at the end of the line! Let the waters rise up and gobble the mountains. I’m happy to be here! Here in this state! Here on this show! And if I’m going to be buried up here in the hills, let that water level suck me back into the ocean! And if I burn here, in some wildfire, well, then I guess I will go up into the air, and maybe one day I’ll rain back down! Maybe I’ll fall from a cloud during filming and make it onscreen that way! That would be something. I’m excited for that, too! I imagine it...to be...so refreshing...so refreshing...” she fades out.

At the front of the line Helmut can still hear her. “What in the hell is that person saying?” he asks aloud.

The general chatter gets louder, and Helmut decides to just focus on the road, still a bit hungover.

Switching hands again, swapping the coffee- and rope-holding hands, Helmut continues leading the chain-gang across the grounds of his home, for what feels like three hours now. The

more time his hangover has to subside given the influx of caffeine of scolding coffee, the trudge through the acres and acres of campground are actively cancelling out any noticeable feelings of improvement. Maybe it's just getting hotter out. Sipping on the beverage keeps his eyes open, at least.

They traverse through a string of oak trees, which gives them a rare bit of shade; it soon turns to oak savanna, and the shade retreats. The sun is getting higher in the sky, and Helmut sees by the tire tracks that they are getting closer to the trailers.

The very old man marching directly behind Helmut has not said a word since being the first Contestant to speak up. Now, he taps Helmut and speaks up again. With the hand holding the coffee cup Helmut gave him, the old man, shaking as he moves forward, points to some speck about an acre ahead of them on the golden savanna, popping the lid of the cup off and splashing hot espresso over those around him:

“Sir! Sir, excuse me, Sir, but what's that out there!” He yells, startling the others and halting their chatter.

“Ouch! Fuck!” Helmut yells back at his face in pain, “You burnt my fucking shoulder!” He quickly tries wiping off the hot coffee that got through the holes in his ragged shirt.

“Oh, oh, oh,” stutters the man, “I'm sorry, Sir — but look! All the way over there, ahead of us! What is that thing?”

The Contestants have all quieted now, startled by the man's sudden panic at the front of the chain-gang, down to hushed concern about the moving objects down the road.

“It's fine, it's fine,” Helmut says to the man. “Just give me that back.” The man hands him the dripping cup of coffee.

“That, down there?” He says louder, to address all the Contestants. “Those are mountain lions. Two of them, likely a male and a female, though I can’t see that well from here.”

“Mountain lions?!” Many of them begin repeating in disconcerted tones.

“Yeah,” says Helmut, “they live here, too. You just have to respect that it’s their home as much as it is yours, now. They’re just trying to get by in Simi, just like all of us who work on the show.” Helmut looks forward and keeps marching ahead.

“Are we going to travel around them?” one Contestant asks.

“Yeah, it doesn’t look like they’re moving,” another says.

“Do they attack Contestants?”

“Oh, no, it looks like they’re moving toward *us* now!”

“Listen,” Helmut says, “again, please: None of you are helping with this headache. I’m going to get you there safely, if you all just let me do my job! Now, I know those lions. They’re not going to attack you. We’re almost there, anyway.”

The chain-gang moves on down the road as the pair of cats stroll their way to meeting in the middle. A black hawk glides far overhead, and Helmut thinks, by the periphery of his vision, to have just missed the sight of an actual gopher, burrowing into the dirt beneath a nearby shrub.

Getting close to them now, Helmut can see that the pair are not the adult lions he thought they were and had seen many times before out in the foothills. It appears that these are two small mountain lion kittens he had no idea were living in Simi.

“Everybody, stop moving,” he commands to the roped-up talent. They halt. “Nobody move anywhere, got it?” They nod and say yes. Helmut places them the leash and kneels onto the ground. He removes the strap of the wooden crate from around his neck and slowly open the top of it.

Grabbing two of the espresso cups out, Helmut opens the lids to them and places them side by side in the middle of the dirt road.

Slowly, the kittens approach the cups. They stop a few feet away and begin to hiss at Helmut and show him their sharp teeth. Helmut slowly steps back himself a few feet, crouching still, and making the cats closer to the coffee now than he was. Still, they continue to hiss, and approach the cups, steam coming off the top and into the air.

Helmut wonders, with their heightened sense of smell, how delicious that aroma must be for them!

The kittens begin to take little sips out of the top, the scolding heat of it not seeming to be any issue at all for them. One of them, the smaller one, begins to sink its fangs through the paper cup, tearing holes out of which liquid is spilling, and tries to pick it up. It fails, knocking the full coffee cup onto itself and the ground. This scares them both off, and they scurry away toward a cluster of rocks a dozen or so feet away.

Helmut rushes over to the coffee cups and picks them up, trying to salvage as much of the espresso he brewed as he can. He turns back around to the Contestants and tells them to wait where they are for a moment. He walks over the rocks where the lions ran off to, and after a few minutes of getting on all fours and prodding around, he discovers a hidden lion's den. It holds not just the two kittens he already saw, but two more! They're all about the length of his forearm; they have sand-colored fur with vague black stripes, little triangle ears and white-blue eyes. Wedged between the rocks, they back-up into their den as Helmut approaches them, hissing much more aggressively than before.

"I didn't know you guys were here. Where's you mom and dad, huh?" He says to them.

Helmut places down the coffee cups once more and backs out of the little cave.

“Try not to spill it this time.” He waves back at them as he very slowly exits. Helmut walks back to the chain-gang, lifts the crate back around his shoulder and continues the march forward.

Helmut and the Contestants soon veer off the dirt road into another parking lot on the right, this time smaller and made of asphalt, which rests at the head of the row of workers’ barracks, wherein his bosses’ trailers are parked. He can also see some of the passenger cars from before: The Jeeps, Fords; yet now, he even catches some Cadillacs on the premises. He assumes the nicer looking vehicles must belong to the producers and show runners. They didn’t make visits into Simi often. Are there executives here, too, what the fuck? He wonders. I don’t like the look if this; the whole crew except for the gophers must be here — but where are they?

Approaching the trailer lot, Helmut halts off the edge of the parking lot, next to the leg of a water tower which provides fresh water to the facilities in Area IV.

“We’re all going to have to wait here for some time,” he tells them. “The coffees will stay warm, at least, out here, warm as the sun will keep them anyway.” He places the crate on the ground once more along with his knapsack. He begins to tie the rope leash to a leg of the water tower.

“Those are really some intricate knots you make,” Brent tells Helmut. “Are we allowed to sit down, now that we’re here?”

Helmut nods. Soon the Contestants are all sitting along the sideline of the parking lot, scanning the environment, chatting about the trailers and what an interesting experience being on this show have been so far.

Finally, with the leash to the chain-gang secured to the steel leg, Helmut collapses onto the ground and begins to vomit once again. This time is immediately the worst one all morning.

Once the minimal amount of coffee he drank is gone he's left gagging out from an empty stomach. He blacks out.

When he comes back-to, he sits up and wipes his mouth with his shirt sleeve. To his left he sees the Contestants on the ground, most of them also passed out, likely from the heat. Looking at the sky, he sees it is finally noon.

"Did anyone come out of the trailers yet?" Helmut asks whoever will answer.

The elderly man who marched behind Helmut says, "There's been some talking, might even call it arguing, going on over in those big trailers this last hour or so while you were out. This is a lovely place to be, nonetheless."

"Ugh," Helmut tries to regain his balance on his feet. "The goddamn call sheet said noon. What am I getting paid for?"

"Who knows?" replies the man. Helmut looks at him, not sure if he just cracked a joke. The elderly man grins for a second.

"I'm going to see what's going on." First, he opens his knapsack and stares at his Luger for a moment, then at the Contestants, and then he takes the gun and ties it back up.

"I have this on me," Helmut holds it up to whoever can see, "so don't even think about going for my brandy in that knapsack. And you better leave the coffees where they are." He tucks the Luger into the pocket of his baggy pants and turns around.

As Helmut walks toward the trailer on his own, he hears that the arguing has subsided.

Suddenly he hears gunshots beginning to fire. A handful of adults begin pouring out of the trailers and firing upon each other, wildly and seemingly with no particular human targets. They start shooting at the sky, at each other, at their own feet. Things don't look to different from last

night's debauchery — whatever he remembers from it, anyway — madmen with automatic weapons.

The shootout seems to involve what sounds like the entire crew, and he does not know who else! Bullets fly inside-out through the trailers from the workers inside, spraying outside where Helmut and the Contestants are, shaken, out in the open. One of the trailers suddenly erupts in a blinding light, exploding and popping Helmut's ear drums in an instant.

He ducks and dodges, taking shelter behind a small red rock, the closest one near him. Facing behind him and away from the chaos, he sees a number of Contestants are visibly screaming in fear and pain, looking like they're getting wounded in the spray, unable to move far, as Helmut has already tied them to a stationary position at the water tower's leg.

Trucks are getting pinned with bullets, their tires punctured and torn up with a song of loud hisses as the air bleeds out. A cluster of birds that Helmut didn't notice at first, who must have been perched atop the water tower, quickly flee the scene in a shrieking, flapping cloud.

Helmut, cradling himself fetal now behind the rock, trying to avoid looking at the lineup of Contestants he's laid bare in the line of fire behind him, can't help with his heightened senses but see some of them getting hit by bird shit out of his periphery as the flock flies away from the firefight.

"Gah!" Their mouths motion in anguish, some clearly wounded and some clearly covered in droppings.

What feels like a small grenade, based off the rumbling under Helmut's body, goes off in parking lot. It complete destroys a pickup truck, setting ablaze a car next to it; nobody seems to have been inside of them. Helmut's ears, which stopped ringing some time during the trek over

here, are now pulsing jolts, nauseating him into more dry heaves for what felt like minutes. More flashes go off and projectiles whiz by all around, kicking up dust.

Soon after, Helmut selectively hears a loud, high-pitched *tink* that stands out among the bullets making thuds and into the dirt, among the muffled pain of his eardrums. The sound of water flowing stands out to his sense of hearing again; Helmut sees the Contestants now being showered in a single stream of water, flowing down a hole that must have been shot into the tank of the water tower above them.

That must be some kind of armor-piercing round, a single shot from some kind of field rifle, Helmut thinks, considering the thickness of the tank's metal and all.

The firing begins to calm down, and fewer and fewer shots are being fired each second. Helmut still cannot see a thing from his shelter behind the rock, only the damage that's been done to his surroundings; the Contestants bleeding out behind him, and the hole in the water tower. Subsequent, single-fire shots become apparent, sounding like somebody's making the final rounds of execution.

Helmut peeks his head slowly over the rock. Still, nobody is outside the trailers, nor in the parking lot, nor on the dirt. Wherever these last bullets are being fired, the person firing must still be inside one of the trailers, all of them surrounded now by the splayed corpses of show-workers. The adrenaline rush from all of this has done a considerable number for Helmut's hangover.

Another shot fires, twice as loud this time. The sound of pacing boots can faintly be heard.

After the firing stops for a moment, a figure emerges screaming from a trailer door, billows of gun smoke pouring out behind him and through the small bullet holes on the sides of the trailer.

It's the guy who was supposed to be directing the first episode of Season 12 today; he's on a roster of directors that rotate episodically. He's a thin, bald guy; and now he stumbles outside, hacking up blood onto his shirt and tripping, head-planting into a shrub. He looks seriously wounded to Helmut, given all the convulsing his body's doing on the ground.

He is quickly shot in the back of the head from someone inside the same trailer still.

A new figure emerges from the trailer, dressed in all black with a large brown beard and huge, scraggly hair that looked like he had just been struck by lightning. He's moving flamboyantly, almost prancing down the steps of the trailer. He spots Helmut almost immediately after firing the shot.

"Stand up! Who are you?" this man turns and shouts to Helmut quivering behind the rock, taking aim with his weapon. "And take that thing out of your pocket, I can see it, it's obvious! Do it slowly!"

Helmut stands up slowly, grabs the Luger from his pants and holds it up with his index finger and thumb, and says his name.

"Okay!" the man yells, "Now, um, throw it over there!" He takes aim at Helmut's head with the same rifle he had just used to execute the director, and by the looks of things now, somehow all the others that were here. Bodies litter the ground and as fast as time is moving for him, he can't process an estimate of how many dead workers are within sight; the whole crew, he knew, was likely here, and likely no longer are.

"What?" says Helmut, "What? You want me to throw this pistol? That's dangerous, it could go off and hit someone."

"Just do something when I tell you to do it!" he shouts, firing a warning shot at the rock before steadying his aim and again targeting Helmut. Helmut tosses it off into the parking lot and

it lands near the pair of trucks still engulfed in flames. It fires when it hits the ground, but misses hitting any of them with a bullet. His Luger is soon caught up in the flames, and Helmut imagines he would feel sadder about the loss of his sidearm if he weren't so confused right now.

“Good,” the wild-looking man grunts, holding aim. “Why aren't you tied up with them? Are you Contestant?”

“No! Don't shoot me. No, I'm a gopher, Sir. My name is Helmut and I'm a gopher.”

“A what?”

“A gopher. I'm a production runner on the show, Sir. I make coffee and stuff.” He points over to the wooden crate he'd put down next to the chain-gang; like some of the bloodier Contestants, it seems that most of the coffee cups inside the crate were shot and either bled out completely or are bleeding out now.

“I'm sort of a jack-of-all-trades,” he continues. “I know the area really well. And, and, I see that water tower,” he points up at it, “it, uh, got damaged in the, uh — it must have gotten hit with a bullet, see — and it's leaking. I — I can fix it, for you, Sir, if, if you want. Please. Don't shoot me. I can help you.”

“Huh,” the man says, “a *gopher*. Well, I have a lot to still learn about television, I suppose. And those, those are the Contestants for today? How did you all get here? Didn't the train come in way back across this camp?”

“And yet you're here, somewhere you're not supposed to be, seeing things you're not supposed to see — and what have you done with them? Are those the Contestants for today? Did you do all this — tie them up like that and bring them here? For what purpose, boy?! You're supposed to be at the trains with them.”

Helmut is not sure whether he is going to be shot a second into his potential response, or if this strange man pointing a rifle at him is even going to shoot him at all, since he hasn't done it yet, which seems like it'd be easy given how many people it seems he just murdered.

"I'm sorry," is what comes out of his mouth.

"You're sorry?"

"The call sheet said call time was noon, Sir. But I got up when I heard the train and I followed it to set. Nothing has gone according to schedule today, as far as I can tell with the information I was given for the workday."

"According to schedule?" The director begins to slowly laugh from the gut, lowering his gun. "There is no schedule anymore, boy. It's all according to script now — the new script."

"New script?" asks Helmut.

"How old are you?" the man demands.

"I'm twelve, today. It's my birthday."

The man lowers his gun. "Well, happy birthday to you. And you work as a *gopher*. Well, I have a lot to still learn about television, I suppose. And those, those are the Contestants for today? How did you all get here? Didn't the train come in way back across this camp?"

"I roped them up, Sir. I brought them over here because all the workers abandoned set."

The director says nothing for a minute, staring at the ground.

"Can you fix it, that leak, in the tank?" he asks sternly, looking back up.

"I can. If you have any, uh, well I would need hydraulic cement."

"What? Is that some kind of TV prop?"

Helmut holds-back a laugh. "No, no," he says, "it's just cement — it can plug the hole, maybe better with some epoxy. I'd just need a stool to reach the ladder on the side of the tower, a

few tools, and some hydraulic cement, maybe some epoxy to coat it with, to get the job done, Sir.”

“I didn’t expect you,” he laughs, “I don’t have any of that kid, there’s no—”

“It should be in the shed. I can get it.” He holds up his hands. “But...what happened here? Where is the rest of the crew? This is not how the day was supposed to start,” he says, looking back at the Contestants, hurt and scared on the ground. Some of them begin to regain themselves and stand up.

“—No,” says the man, “there’s no time for that. And we can fix that later. It’s just a little bit of water.”

“Well, may I ask who you are, Sir?”

“I’m the director. Well, I am now,” he giggles. “Step over here, son. Slowly. Actually, stop. Go back on over there,” he points his rifle toward everything Helmut left beneath the water tower. “Are they all secured there? They’re not going to get up and start dancing, are they? They look absolutely filthy.”

“They won’t get far. I tied the knots well,” Helmut says.

“Good, son. Why don’t you go grab a couple of those coffees of yours from that crate, the ones that don’t have bullet holes in the cups, and come bring them inside the trailer?”

The new director prances over to a slightly larger trailer parked next the one he just came from, jangling the large keychain attached to the waist of his black work pants. At the door to the trailer he begins trying a few different keys in order to unlock it.

Helmut, still thinking too quickly to process what’s just happened, slowly paces back toward the wooden crate on the ground. He stops and kneels down before opening the lid, and he speaks to the chain-gang; they’re all collecting themselves best they can, still visibly shaken.

“Are you all...alright?” he asks.

“Happy to be here,” is the overwhelming response, even delivered through what sounds to be pained groans.

Helmut retrieves the lukewarm cups, leaving the crate lid open. “Feel free to have any of these,” he says, “any that are still good.”

He carries his toward the trailer the director finally made his way into, leaving that door ajar for him.

It takes Helmut a few seconds before he realizes that, wow, here he is now, in even the most bizarre of circumstances, still fetching coffees for some TV show runner. Hiatus is definitely over, although so is his hangover for the most part; but today is hot, and it doesn't look like there's an air conditioner in this bullet-riddled personal trailer.

Looking back over his shoulder at the Contestants as he continues forward, Helmut sees them beginning to form a clumsy, uncoordinated line a few feet away from the steel leg of the water tower, those tied closest at the end reaching as far out as the rope's slack will allow. One by one, they stand for a moment beneath the water stream bleeding out from the bullet hole way at the top of the tank.

It seems like they would have rather had water in this dire heat than lukewarm espresso. To each their own, thinks Helmut. Approaching the trailer, he steps inside.

Gun smoke still swirls around in the trailer, illuminated by sunlight poking through bullet holes in its roof and sides. It seems much larger from the inside, Helmut thinks. He glances around and spots stainless steel appliances and even an empty coffee pot which remained intact through the firefight. Around him are laminated wood paneling along the straight, wide ceiling with hi-hat lights, and marble-like walls lined with framed photographs and paintings. One wide hallway leads down to three separate doors, the one straight ahead which is opened up to a bedroom with a bed that is all shot up; white feathers from the pillows and mattress are littered all around the room. Vibrant, green plants are living about, standing and hanging around in all corners of the trailer in clay pots, some of which are shattered from bullets and have spilled or are still slowly spilling out piles of soil onto the trailer floor.

“I’m in the bathroom,” the director yells from behind a door in the hallway. “I’ll be right out! But, you know, a shoot-out just happened in here, just trying to wash my hands well. Make yourself at home! Everything is okay, now.”

“Uh, okay...” says Helmut, fidgeting near the entrance with his hands in his pockets.

“Just have a seat at the table next to the window, you can put our coffees down there. Brush off the surface if you need to, it may be dirty,” the director giggles while the sink runs. “And don’t touch my fishes, boy!”

There’s even a fish tank in here! — To his left Helmut spots it; one of the few things left unbroken here by whatever carnage had just transpired. He’s never seen a fish tank before, let alone live fish.

He watches them swim about for a moment before getting distracted by a black rectangle mounted on the wall right above the tank. It looks to be a glitching electronic screen inside of a thin, intricately detailed picture frame. Helmut glances around the trailer and notices other glitching surfaces: a wide rectangular piece mounted above the kitchen sink, a similar-sized one above the door to the bedroom at the end of the hallway, and the largest one, positioned on the wall to his left, a big framed rectangle which seems to be taller than his standing height. They’re the only things he’s never seen inside a trailer before, even the nicest ones that belong to the producers and directors. These wall-pieces look to be made of glass, like digital screens. They’re riddled with bullets. The glass, though, seems to have stopped the bullets from fully breaking it, and bits of images are glitching at sporadic spots on within the frames.

Despite its current state, Helmut has still never been in a trailer *this* nice. He’s also never seen one so unique, with the fish and this strange, damaged artwork. He’s just relieved there are no corpses in this trailer like there are littering the ground outside.

How did this man, this self-proclaimed director, manage to be the only person to make it out alive? How did he manage to get himself such a luxury trailer? It's absurd, Helmut realizes as he steps deeper into the trailer, his heartbeat slowing down. It's hard to see through the smoke dancing deeper down the hallway. What is this guy up to?

He hears something metal hit the floor somewhere in the trailer.

"I'll be just a moment," the director shouts from the bathroom. "Make yourself at home, please now."

Helmut takes a seat next to the glass-less window frame through which gun smoke is being sucked outside. It's humid and scorching hot inside this trailer, holding all the morning's heat. He takes a sip of the lukewarm coffee as the sink in the bathroom continues to run for another few minutes...

Looking outside, there they are: a bunch of his coworkers, all except for the gophers, dead now.

So much for rushing to make all the coffee, thinks Helmut. Looking out the broken window frame and scanning the carnage, he takes another sip and waits for the water to stop running.