



MANOS

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or The Hands of Fate

walt carlson

based on the screenplay by Harold P. Warren

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Harold P. Warren

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The sun tracked lower and lower down

Michael's windshield as he drove his family over the high Texas hills. Even as its wide yellow body flashed behind an outcropping, it burned at his eyes like desert heat seeping from rocks in the night. The wide space of steering wheel between his hands boiled; he could feel the heat drifting up against his face. Debbie was napping with her dog, Peppy. Michael hoped she'd sleep the whole way to the Valley Lodge—yesterday's drive had been punctuated by her whining and they'd stopped early just so he could get out of the damn car.

“Michael,” his wife mumbled, stretching from her own nap, “can we put the top down? It's so stuffy in here. And if we don't wake Debbie up soon she'll never sleep tonight.” Margaret sighed, and for a moment Michael wondered if she had gone back to sleep and left him once more in the smooth tunnel of his driving. “Michael, please.”

In the valley, the wind from the open top wrapped around Michael, making the car feel light and responsive in his hands. His wife had fallen asleep again. Her head moved in tandem with the road's gentle curves and dips; her hair danced around her face like a scarf. The fields rolling around the road offered up the tangy smell of ripening cotton. Michael tilted his head as far back as he dared; his eyelids fluttered and tried to close and bathe him in the memories that smell evoked.

He turned on the radio. There was a little pop of static and the sound swelled as the speakers warmed themselves up. He kept the volume low: Margaret had stirred when it popped, and for a moment Michael thought she would wake and ruin the strange gliding sensation, that feeling which seemed to start in the space between his shoulders and spread down through the muscles in his arms to the warm backs of his hands. Just under the rushing air he could hear the jazz station the radio caught upon. Billie Holiday was singing about strange fruit hanging from a tree; the words surfaced every so often, like a conversation he could barely understand.

“Daddy.”

He looked in the rearview mirror for his daughter. She was probably hungry or thirsty, or—worse—had to pee. But she was asleep, her little face smooth save for the barest quivering of her lips as she breathed. Peppy was staring at him, not at the sudden movement of his head as dogs do, but at Michael. Staring. Michael looked back to the road. He hated

that dog. The radio was losing the signal; they were getting too far in the mountains for the little antenna to work. *Strange*, he was able to make out before the radio died, that one word extended and embroidered with the rich texture of her voice. He listened to the static for a minute before switching it off.

The map said there was another seventeen miles before the junction he would take to that final stretch of road leading to the Valley Lodge. Of the week of his vacation, one day was already gone and a second was being gobbled up.

He wondered if Herman was moving the stock like he should. There were four hundred pounds of prime fertilizer coming in on Thursday, and it came with a prime price that corn-fed idiot with his constant, gap-toothed smile couldn't pitch. He shouldn't have agreed to this trip. Herman could move the regular stuff all right, but the shit that was on its way needed a special touch. *Now, if you want the same old results—I saw your crop last year; it was good, but not as good as it could be—by all means buy the Hill. But here, and like kids following an ice cream truck they would follow him to the inside of the lot, here is what you need to take your soil and your crop to a new level of productivity: the King.*

Margaret laughed softly. She had been watching him while he mouthed his pitch, seeing it unfold before him on the empty road.

“What’s so funny?” he asked angrily; he was trying to remember the particular list of ingredients and features from

the flier and she had screwed it up. One more sale lost.

“You,” she said smiling. “You’re so funny.” Debbie stretched awake.

“Dammit, Maggie, you woke her up.”

“How was your nap, honey?” Ignoring him. “You sleep okay?”

Debbie nodded. “I’m cold, Mommy. Can we put the top up?”

Margaret touched his arm. “Yeah. Daddy, I’m cold too,” she mimed, scrunching her face. Michael smiled. Sometimes she was all right.

She spoke to him while he pulled the top out and tried to force its clasps together. “How much longer, Mike?”

“We should be pretty close by now. Any time now we’ll come up on the junction for highway ten and then it’s only about twelve miles from there.” He pulled the heavy canvas and snapped it in place. Half done.

“I don’t know,” she was looking at the map he had tucked by her feet. “From this map it looks like we were supposed to turn onto highway nine and then take the I-10 junction. If we’re almost to highway ten we’re way off. Oh, Mike.”

“Let me look at that.” He took it from her. “It’s that Herman Frye, I was thinking about how he’s going to screw me over while we’re out here and I got distracted.” He threw the map back into the car. He could hear Debbie crying.

“Debbie, I’m sorry,” he finished putting the top up and stuck

his head into the window to comfort her but she was dry-faced, looking out the small back window and absently stroking Peppy's head. The dog was sleeping.

"What is it, Mike?" Margaret asked. And when he didn't answer she whispered, "Are we really that *lost*?"

He stopped looking at his daughter and the dog and turned to face the sun, now just a coin balancing on the rocky edge of the horizon. "No, of course not." He hadn't noticed how late it was; they were in unfamiliar country now and he could hardly stand the thought of trying to find his way in the dark. "I've never gotten us lost before, have I?"

Michael eased the needle past seventy, trying to find that one wrong turn before the sun set completely. He wasn't surprised then, when the patrol car's red and blue lights blossomed in his mirror.

"Do you realize how fast you were going?" The cop had asked Michael to step out of the car and he stepped away from it, closer to the cop so he wouldn't lean against the roof—couldn't make it look like he wasn't taking this seriously. The cop thumbed the brim of his hat up, exposing a smooth, sweaty expanse of forehead. His lower lip bulged out stupidly. Michael hated him. He hated the stale, semi-rancid stink of a man who sat in his car all day. He hated the cop's egg-colored eyes, his dull irises half-covered by thick eyelids. *He wasn't taking this seriously.*

“I’m sorry, it’s just that we’re on vacation and I took a wrong turn, and to be honest with you, I’m not sure I can find the right one before it gets dark.”

The cop’s eyelids rose a fraction and he sucked his lower lip in a little, a low breezy noise. Michael suspected he had never heard someone talk so quickly. The cop looked to the glowing ridge of mountains. “Yup,” he said slowly with that same breezy noise. “Well, I suppose I can let you go with a warning. This time.”

“Thank you, officer. Thank you very much. It won’t happen again.” He began to drift back to the car.

“Ah, it’ll happen again,” his lower lip bulged back out. “Just see to it that it doesn’t happen on my roads.”

Michael’s face felt stuck in the tightlipped smile he had worn since the cop told him he was free to go. “Sure,” he said and closed the door. He watched the patrolman lope back to his car.

They had been driving for another ten minutes when the car crested the top of a hill and the windshield filled with hazy amber light. Michael scanned the valley floor for another car, some smooth pinpoints of light, and saw none. There was a building on an even square of land ten or fifteen miles off the main road. Light was coming from it, one single bright diamond. Beyond the turn to the house, another fifteen or twenty miles by the road but only about ten as the crow flies,

was the dimly illuminated GAS sign that marked the mostly unhelpful man Michael asked for directions.

“Is that it?” Margaret gestured toward the building, “The Valley Lodge?”

“I’m tired, Daddy,” Debbie whined. The kid had been sleeping all day; Michael didn’t know how she could be tired now.

“I don’t know, it might be.”

The light was murky in the valley. The headlights swept over a simple sign. “Hey,” Michael said, looking in the rearview mirror, trying to see the sign’s other side, “I think that said it was the Valley Lodge.”

“Finally!” Debbie sighed and Margaret smiled at her. Michael looked back and saw Peppy’s dark eyes staring at him.

There was another sign pointing, Michael assumed, at the lit window he saw from the top of the hill. He turned and they passed a parked car, two heads moving in unison peeking out from the opened top, kids necking. Michael’s feeling of dread lifted a little: Even in this unfamiliar piece of his state there were teenagers necking. He drove on.

The road twisted and turned through the desert, the straight road he spotted from the valley’s lip must have been an illusion. Michael never saw another road branching away and so knew the way he was going was the only one.

“You don’t think they’ll be all booked up, do you?”

“No. A little out of the way place like this? They probably never fill up.”

“Do they have a pool, Mommy?” They had to buy Debbie a swimsuit the night before, and paid too much for Michael to justify the half hour she spent in the water.

“I don’t think so,” Michael answered. “But they have lots of trails so we’ll be able to go on hikes. That’ll be fun, right?” She didn’t answer, but smiled in a tight little line like her mother sometimes did, amusing him.

“We’ll ask if there are any ponds on the trails, okay, honey?”

“Okay.”

Peppy started to yip and whine, each finely curled hair on the black poodle standing stiff.

“Goddammit, Debbie, calm your dog down,” Michael snapped. Peppy wasn’t glaring out the window at some shadow, she quivered in the middle of the back seat, her eyes fixed on something beyond the windshield. Debbie put her arms around Peppy and began whispering into her thin ear. Peppy yipped a few more times and settled into a whine. Michael sighed and ran one hand through his crew cut. He lifted his sunglasses to check on the day’s fading light. It didn’t seem much brighter without them, somehow.

Margaret put her hand on his leg.

Finally, they crested a little hill and Michael saw the window spilling its meager light onto the pale yellowed sand

of dusk. He smiled, they had made it. “Hey, Debbie,” he said, turning, “look where we are.” Debbie shifted and leaned onto the back of the seat between her parents.

“Look, Peppy! Look!” She grabbed the dog and lifted her sagging head above the seat. Michael, who had expected Peppy to whine or bark directly into his ear, was surprised by the dog’s silence.

He pulled the car into the house’s dirt drive and parked.

“Oh, Mike, I don’t think this is the right place.”

The house was smaller than it appeared from the road: the front was covered with white stucco washed light beige by the desert winds, and windowless; the light came instead from a screen door in the middle of the house. Michael opened his door and started to get out when Margaret grabbed his arm. “What are you doing, Mike?”

There was something almost familiar about this place, he thought, and he wanted to see how far the weird familiarity went. “I just want to find out where we are. I’ll be right back.” He swung himself out, his wife’s hand caught on his then slid away. “Maybe this *is* the Valley Lodge.” He shut the door, hoping someone would hear the noise and show themselves.

“What’s Daddy doing?” Margaret’s response was too quiet to hear. The sun was still not quite down but he was no longer full of foreboding at the thought of night. He hesitated a few steps from the car.

In his light zip-up sweater—a present from Margaret he

only recently wore with regularity—and blue polo shirt, Michael hoped he didn't look like a crazy person creeping toward someone's house. He took off his sunglasses and slipped them into his pocket.

He heard a foot fall behind him and turned. It was only Margaret.

"Mike, I'm scared," she said, her voice a barely-controlled whisper. "It's getting dark. Let's just go back to the gas station and get better directions."

Debbie was looking out the window at her parents, her hand resting on Peppy's head.

"Dammit, Maggie, this whole trip was your idea. You wanted to go to the Valley Lodge? We're at the Valley Lodge." Her face fell, she looked away from him. "I don't know what you were expecting."

"I thought," she started, "I thought it would be nice, Michael."

He put his hands on her arms, "I'm sorry, Maggie. It's been a long day, and—"

The screen door opened; its ancient desert-worn mechanism made a dry, shuddering sound as the rod tugged at the spring. Someone was on the tiny concrete porch.

It was a tall man swathed in a huge, heavy-looking coat. His face was slack, but his eyes—mostly hidden in the shadow from his hat's frayed brim—were nervous and darted across the scene before him. His lower face was covered with a short,

ill-kept beard the same shade of dirty brown as his shirt. He leaned on a thick walking stick topped with a twist of wood like a hand warped into a claw. Michael felt Margaret come a step closer, her hand hovering at the small of his back. Michael stared at the man, almost sure he was a trick of the shadows and the evening's mounting dark. Michael swayed a little in the breeze, his body's inner machinations ready to take a step forward.

The man's mouth pulled itself open, "I am Torgo," he bleated. His voice, like his eyes, was shaking and furtive, rising and falling as he forced the words out. "I take care of the place while the Master is away."

Michael went forward. Now that he had a name, he could turn on his salesman's charm. He had won an award for that charm three years ago, 1963 State Salesman of the Year, and Texas was Warren Fertilizer's biggest market.

"Hi, Torgo," he said, extending his hand. "We've gotten ourselves lost and all turned around. Can you tell us the way to the Valley Lodge, or at least the way out of here? My family and I would really appreciate it." The road had knotted itself in his head.

"There is no place like that here," Torgo said, not noticing Michael's hand. He twitched as if standing still were a challenge.

"Which way is out of here?" Michael tried again, hearing his voice rise more than he would like it to.

“There is no way out of here,” Torgo said, glancing at the last sliver of daylight. “It’ll be dark soon.” His face convulsed, and he said more quietly, as if reminding himself, “There is no way out of here; it’ll be dark soon.”

“No way out?” Margaret caught up with Michael and put her hand on his arm. “Mike, I’m scared.”

“Well, maybe we can stay the night, it won’t be too bad. It’d be a whole hell of a lot better than sleeping in the car.” He put his arm around Margaret, trying to reassure her, and switched on his million-dollar smile, “How about it, Torgo?”

“Mike, I don’t like the look of his place, let’s just leave,” Margaret pleaded.

Torgo hesitated, still holding tight to his staff. Debbie, trailing Peppy along, came from around the car. “No, not the child,” he bleated. “The Master doesn’t like,” a weird half-smile crossed his face and was gone, “children. The Master wouldn’t approve.”

“Mike, I don’t—”

“We’re here now, and it’s getting dark like you said,” he put his other hand on Debbie’s shoulder as if to emphasize this point, “So I’m sure your Master wouldn’t kick us out.”

In fact, it had gotten dark. For so long the world seemed frozen on its axis, bathing Texas in perpetual twilight; Michael had not noticed how difficult it was to see past the lines of light made from the house and his car’s still burning headlights. Peppy whined.

“I just don’t know about it, I just don’t know.”

“Please,” he smiled again. “Just for the night.”

Torgo rocked where he stood, his head tilted back slightly and his restless eyes closed. He seemed to be praying. The bristles around his lips shuddered with his breathing. “Very well, you can stay,” Torgo opened his eyes, “tonight. The Master will be very disturbed. But you can stay.” He glanced at them, “The child too, yes.”

“Why don’t you and Mommy take Peppy inside,” Michael nudged them forward. “Torgo and I will get the luggage.”

Margaret half-turned her face toward him, he saw for the briefest moment her wide, terrified eyes, her disbelieving mouth, before she followed Debbie past Torgo into the house.

Michael opened the trunk and slung his bag over his shoulder; it was by far the smallest of the bunch, something he prided himself on. Torgo lurched forward; his twisted legs moved stiffly beneath him, the staff did most of the work. He limped to the trunk and shakily tugged the remaining bags onto his shoulders.

“Torgo, we’ll stay tonight, and then tomorrow—”

“You must leave. You cannot stay, the Master would not approve.”

Up close, Torgo looked older than Michael had first guessed. Deep lines creased his face, his eyebrows permanently arched into a furrow, greasy hair fell from his

hat.

Michael strode into the house and dumped his bag onto the threadbare sofa where Debbie and Peppy sat. He tousled Debbie's hair. "How do you like it here, Debbie? Having fun?" Now that he was at rest, he felt magnanimous, expansive. The walls were mostly bare, the same beige color as the outside of the house. There was a pair of hand-carved wooden sculptures hanging next to a closed door, and a dusty glass-fronted hutch, but nothing else.

He stood and moved next to Margaret. Her slim body had blocked the fireplace from view, but Michael could see now what had so transfixed her: there was a bust of a bald man, blackened by soot and smoke, his eyes rolled up into his head; it was surrounded by life-size sculptures of hands with skin bubbled and split as if by fire, raised in pain. In front of the bust lay a small trough filled with dried sticks and bramble, but it was the painting above the bust that held Margaret's attention.

A thin man with black hair posed before a pillar and the night, the figure stared out from deep within his skull. Sunken, bloodless, papery cheeks framed a mean twisted mouth beneath a mustache. The man wore a black cloak with red markings obscured by its folds. He had a dog with him; its ears were back. Its eyes were milky and dead-white, lit by some terrible fire.

"My god, Mike," she whispered, "what have you done."

He laid his arm across her shoulders. His hand felt heavy on her arm.

“Must be the Master himself.”

Margaret tore her eyes away from the figure’s flat gray ones and looked up at Michael. He was staring, rapt, his mouth glistening in the low light. Torgo limped to the closed door and went in. The end of his staff scraped the floor and Margaret felt herself tense. Michael didn’t seem to notice.

“I’d hate to run up on him in the dark,” Michael said, “or even in the light, for that matter.” His voice sounded wooden, like he was reciting, trying to convince her of something. She could hear Torgo moving in the other room. Suddenly, she imagined Torgo’s rough hands on her suitcase, on her clothes, and felt sick. She moved away from Michael and sat next to Debbie, who was happily playing with Peppy. How could Debbie be smiling in a place like this? Margaret pressed her palms against her eyes. When she opened them, Mike was consumed by a red blotch. Maybe she was going mad.

“I take it that’s the Master,” the blotch said. She blinked a few times to clear her vision. “Where did you say he was?”

Torgo was standing with his back to her. His shoulders curved toward his chest. “He has,” his hand tightened around the staff, “left this world. But he is with us always.” The staff swayed forward. “No matter where we go, he is with us.”

“He’s *dead*?” Mike, standing in front of the fire-gutted chimney, making small talk, infuriated her, but she was scared

of Torgo and so reigned herself in. “I thought you said he was away.”

“Dead? No, madam,” Torgo’s head cocked to one side but he did not turn. “Not dead the way you know it.” His head rolled the other way, “He is with us always. There is nothing to fear, madam. The Master likes you. Nothing will happen to you, he likes you.”

“*Likes me?*” the words sent shivers up her spine and brought with them a fresh wave of nausea. “Mike,” she moaned. She didn’t care if Torgo heard. Mike raised his eyebrows at her and shrugged his shoulders like it was no big deal. Debbie was still playing with Peppy.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Mike said. She knew he thought it was all in her imagination, but it wasn’t, it couldn’t be.

Torgo shuddered. “I think it’s best,” he said, stumbling to the door he had left ajar, “if I show you to the bedroom now.”

“Come on,” Michael said, extending his hand to Margaret, who took it and allowed herself to be pulled up in a haze.

The bedroom looked so normal in the glare of two bare bulbs that Margaret braced against the wall to steady herself. Her hand fell against the light switch and the room was plunged into darkness. In the seconds before the lights were switched back on, Margaret saw, from the light from the other room, that Torgo was facing her from the edge of the shadow.

Michael snapped on the lights, swearing at her. Torgo's eyes lingered on her for a moment in the bright but his hungry, captivated stare fluttered away as her eyes adjusted themselves.

Their bags were at the foot of the bed. There was a short chest of drawers topped with a round mirror. There was a shallow set of shelves against one wall. The single window was dusty but unbroken. Outside, the night was deep and dark—neither a single foot of sand nor stalk of desert plant was visible.

“What's the matter, Margaret?” Michael reached from the switch toward her shoulder.

She stepped backward from the room. “No, not now. Not now, Michael.”

An animal howled in the desert, a terrible bellowing sound that hung in the suddenly stale air. Margaret slumped back and hit the door frame, her hand clapped over her mouth to keep her screams inside.

Michael ran past her and barged through the screen door to stand on those few concrete steps. He stepped into the night and disappeared.

Margaret fell forward, feeling sobs of terror beginning to well up, and flung open the screen door, feeling every bit like she was going to scream for Mike, but when she opened her mouth it was only to whisper over and over again. Something black ran past her into the desert. The howl

sounded again, closer this time, and Margaret found she was crying her husband's name, a singled ragged sound that tore at her throat.

Michael reappeared. His face, normally tinged with red, was white. The rejuvenation the place had imbued in him had faded.

"What kind of place is this?" Margaret was whispering again, rapid-fire, and clutched his wrists. "We have to go now, Michael. Now, please, we have to go *now*."

"We'll go right now," he said, looking not at her but back into the house. "Torgo, get our luggage, we're leaving."

Her eyes widened when he called for Torgo, and she shook her head violently.

"It'll be faster with his help," Michael said and slipped his wrists from her. "Don't worry about him." He smiled to show it would be okay; some of the color had returned to his face.

"Fine, fine, fine," she hissed, "just start the car then."

He disappeared back into the night, conspicuous now for its near-absolute silence. The headlights turned on, and Margaret stared at the small mound of black they couldn't clear away.

"Michael," she tried.

"Not *now*, Margaret."

"But Michael," the words seemed to project from her body, she wasn't sure if she was speaking aloud. "Michael, it's

Peppy. Peppy's dead.”

Michael turned the keys; the engine rumbled, the headlights flickered, and then they both went out. Margaret was aware only of the sound of her own pounding heart and her breathing—quick and shallow. She touched her face. In the dark, a feeling of bodilessness as in a dream stole over her. Her fingers came away wet with sweat.

A light appeared and floated a short distance, igniting the thin strip of chrome along the car's dashboard. There was a thump, and the light disappeared. When Michael switched it back on, Margaret could see the black gleam of a gun barrel.

“What's wrong,” she whispered, “Why won't it start? What are we going to do about Peppy?”

Michael took her arm. She didn't remember him moving the yards from the car to the steps. “I don't know.” His face was blocked out by the screen of the flashlight.

She felt herself turning. His grip on her arm was a vice propelling her up the final step into the house; his voice like a radio warming up, fluctuating at her. *Check on Debbie, see what's taking Torgo so damned long.* And she was in.

Debbie was asleep on the couch. Each eye shrunk down to its ellipses, her hair brushed across her forehead, her mouth and its delicate lips such a pale shade of red. Margaret rubbed something sticky between her thumb and forefinger. Soreness blossomed up her forearm; it was blood on her fingers. She had been pinching herself.

She was in the bedroom. Torgo was nowhere in sight, which made her feel safer. No need to talk to him and hear his shuddering bleats. She touched the stretched fabric of the duffel bag. She had laid the bag open on their bed only two days before. Debbie ran into the room with Peppy at her heels, holding up just one more skirt, or dress, or pair of sandals. She could almost feel the gentle rumble in her fingers as the zipper travelled along its track, closing its teeth.

The stone tore into the earth, scraping away the loosest layer of dirt, crumbling the packed ground. It hit again. A dull, almost hollow thump and another scoop like a roar. The flashlight put the shallow hole into high relief. Michael brought the stone down again and again, digging away precious inches, fire kindled in his arms and back. He put Peppy's body in the hole, swallowing up the light, and patted dirt over the dog. He looked into the darkness surrounding him. No noise. No sign of the animal that killed Peppy. He brushed his hands together, dirt and flecks of rock falling away, and stood.

Margaret stroked Debbie's forehead. The girl's warm head was resting on Margaret's leg, her tiny fist balled against her chin.

"I buried Peppy."

Debbie's eyelids fluttered at the mention of her dog's name. Michael shifted from one leg to the other.

“What could have done it, Mike?”

Debbie stirred.

“It was probably some animal. The desert is full of them.”

“Oh, Mike, I want to leave now.”

“I know, Maggie. Torgo, where’s the phone?”

Torgo was in front of the fireplace, the painting’s eyes peering over his hat. He moved his staff from one hand to the other.

“You know,” Michael tried, “Alexander Graham Bell, telephone?”

“There is none, sir. The Master does not approve of such devices.”

“Then where *is* the nearest phone?” Margaret pleaded.

“The nearest phone is at the crossroads,” Torgo said. “Ten miles away.”

“*Ten miles?* Might as well be ten *thousand* miles.”

“Easy, honey,” Michael snapped, “it won’t help to get mad. We can’t walk out, not tonight. I’ve got to get the car to start. We’re trapped otherwise.”

Margaret folded clothes she didn’t remember unpacking, and laid them on the bed. As she passed the room’s open door she could hear the car’s engine rumble as it labored to start and Mike’s swearing carried to her over the still air. She folded one of Debbie’s dresses, a white one with pastel floral

print, and pushed it against the bottom of the bag.

“You can’t leave now,” Torgo muttered from the doorway. “The Master wants you.” He stepped in, his face indistinct in the light. “You can’t leave now.”

“Wants me?” Margaret froze, not daring to turn and see Torgo only feet away. She was holding another one of Debbie’s dresses, and her arms felt numb. There seemed to be pressure building at the base of her skull.

“He wants you for his wife,” Torgo answered, and she couldn’t tell if he had moved. “He loves,” his staff struck the floor, stepped forward, “beautiful women.”

Margaret lowered the dress into the bag. The pressure forced itself into her skull and butted against the backs of her eyes; the room was incredibly bright. She inhaled sharply, unaware she was holding her breath. Torgo was in front of her—she had turned.

“But he can’t have you,” he said in a half-strained cry, “I want you.”

In her childhood, she had played baseball with her brother and his friends, center field, and Torgo’s hand rising from his side was like the ball after a good hit. Weightless, hanging, it came into focus in slow motion on its journey back to earth. Margaret was paralyzed, her teeth ground together. He leaned forward, his face forcing itself to keep that same limp expression even as his eyebrows drew themselves up and his lips parted into a hungry grin. His shaky hand pushed up

her shoulder until its fingers plunged into her hair. She saw it all from a great distance. Her body was frozen. Her mouth gaped open. Torgo sent his fingers deeper, brushing the back of her neck with his nails.

She stumbled, and one hand found the edge of the bed. Torgo stared.

“Don’t ever try that again, you beast,” she hissed.

“Don’t—”

“The Master wants you, but he can’t have you,” Torgo cried, his voice rising, “I want you.”

She took a step back, the mattress pressing against the backs of her knees. She wanted to sit down: the pressure was becoming unbearable. “Stop that talk this instant, you hear,” she fought the urge to sit. “Get *away* from me.”

“He can’t have you, he can’t have you,” Torgo was chanting, oblivious or ignoring her. The engine rumbled. Margaret’s eyes begged to close. “He wants you, but he can’t have you.”

Her open palm struck his face. Nausea threatened to engulf her as flecks of spit hit her hand. She sank onto the bed. Torgo didn’t move. His fingernails clicked against his walking stick. She rubbed her hand furiously on the covers, cleaning. The floor felt nebulous and thin.

“Let me go,” she said, pitching forward, but the impact of the floor never came: She was standing. The pressure tilted to the cavernous back of her skull. “Let me out of here now,” her

mouth was so dry. "Do you hear me?" Torgo was still in front of her. "Now. Let me go now."

"Please, madam," he said, his voice mixing with the car's rumbles. "I meant no harm."

"I'm going to," she squeezed her eyes shut and tried to suck moisture from her throat into her mouth, "tell my husband." There was something wrong about that, but she couldn't place it.

"I meant no harm," he stepped back, afraid she might fall. "I'll protect you. I can," he smiled, "keep you safe. He can't have you."

The pressure was ebbing. "Fine," she said, "fine, just let me go."

The rumbling had stopped.

She stood on the front steps. The breeze blew strands of hair across her face like spider legs, scurrying.

"The damn car won't start; I can't find anything wrong with it." He was beside her or in front of her. She watched the light playing on the ground, there was a moth throwing itself against the bulb. She could hear its soft body hitting the glass. Mike's eyes were two splotches of black, his mouth a canyon pulsating above his chin. "What is it, Maaaargaret?" His lower jaw seemed to fall away to his chest. "What's wrong?"

"Debbie's gone." She felt light, buoyed by the pressure in her head, the truth of the thing.

Michael put his hand against the couch: still warm. She couldn't have gone far. Torgo slouched in the bedroom doorway, his misshapen legs half-buckled.

"Torgo," Margaret said, "did you see Debbie, Torgo? Will you help us look?"

Michael didn't wait for him to answer, but just pushed into the kitchen.

The light didn't work. The walls were lined with cupboards and drawers. In the gap between the counter and the suspended cupboards, the walls were painted a dark, sickly yellow. The air was stifling and bitter, and something was rotten. He listened, but couldn't hear anyone in the other room. There was a narrow door on the far wall. He walked to it, flipping open cupboard doors as he went. Here, a single plate. There, a stack of bowls. The sink was deep and stained so thoroughly it was almost black. The door was bolted shut. There was no way Debbie could have gone through, and yet—
—and yet. He slid the bolt free and opened the door; there was something sweet and rich expanding within him. Mostly obscured by the distance and the desert plants, Michael saw the warm, unsteady light of a small fire. He wanted to go to it, felt that the trip would take a matter of moments, the ground miles from his head. His hands flexed unconsciously. A breeze blew across the desert.

"Daddy?"

Debbie was in the other doorway, the light behind her

washing away her features so that Michael wondered if the tiny dark figure was just a shadow. She moved into the kitchen and the door swung shut. She disappeared. He closed and bolted the door: the fire could wait for now.

“What is it, Debbie?”

“Mommy said to get you.”

Margaret smiled up at him drunkenly when he entered the room. Her head was tilted to her chest and her eyes were half-closed. Torgo was hunched in a far corner, the whites of his eyes shone from the shadows. “Look what Debbie found, Mike,” she murmured, “He followed her home.” Her throat sounded full of repressed laughter. He followed her gesture to the front door, and, seeing nothing, opened it.

The dog was there. It was huge and black, and as it had been painted, its ears were back. It rose when Michael opened the door, regarding him with its milky eyes.

“He’s my dog, Daddy.”

The dog’s eyes moved almost imperceptibly to her face before returning to Michael’s.

“What about Peppy?” he ventured, not taking his eyes from the dog’s.

“Oh silly Daddy,” she jumped the last two steps and ran to the dog, “Peppy’s dead.”

With a final look at Michael, it ran away into the night, he lost it in the dark. Debbie started to run after it, almost leaving the dim circle of light, but Michael called after her.

She was hugging him, burying her face in his sweater and crying *Daddy why did he run away from me?* He ran his hand absently through her hair and led her inside.

“Where did you find the dog, baby?” He wasn’t sure Margaret was conscious; her eyes were pale crescents of white. Torgo was gone.

“In the big place,” she sniffed. “It was a big, dark place,” she sat on the couch and snuggled next to her mother, who didn’t move. “But I wasn’t afraid of the dark, there were people in it.”

“Where, Debbie?” But he already knew: the fire in the desert.

“Over here, Daddy,” she pushed off the couch and went to the door. Margaret’s eyes opened.

Outside, Michael walked a little ahead of his wife and daughter. He was eager to get to the fire. Still, he felt the thing expanding within his chest, propelling him over low bushes and jutting rocks, always to the fire dancing in the center of his vision. The light from his flashlight bobbed before Margaret and Debbie, now there, now blotted out by Michael’s excited body.

The dog was there, lying at the Master’s feet. The Master was laid upon a slab covered in images of hands so that his body seemed to be held aloft. At his side was the fire, made high with blackened logs and stuffed with brush. In its middle was an idol in the shape of a tortured hand reaching to the sky,

smoke tendrils weaving through the gaps in its wrought form. Margaret gasped. They were standing on the edge of the firelight, and Margaret had noticed what Michael had not: there *were* people in the darkness. Half a dozen columns were spaced evenly around the slab in a circle. On every column except for those at the Master's feet and head were lashed two women a yard above the ground. Their faces were smooth and still as statues. Their gauzy gowns waved in the breeze. The columns at the Master's feet and head held only one woman each. Their lashings were finely woven, and their gowns showed more embellishments than the others. Michael moved into the light.

The Master's eyes were closed, his hands folded at his waist. His cloak fell over the edges of the slab. Michael studied his sunken eyes for any sign of movement beneath their lids and found none. His papery lips were parted. Even in his slumber, Michael felt a glow of power from the Master. The dog was watching him.

“Oh god, Mike, oh god.”

Margaret had not followed him. Her face shone by the fire like the other women's and it took him a moment to realize her eyes were open. Debbie held tight to her mother's embracing arms. They were retreating to the house. Michael touched the heavy black fabric of the Master's cloak and followed, the little circle from the flashlight dancing over them.

Margaret was already in the bedroom, the door shut, when he mounted the steps into the house. Debbie must be in there too, he thought. He put his ear gently against the door; he'd let them sleep. It had been a long day. He paced back to the couch, his legs full of nervous energy. The Master stared at him from the painting; now, in his memory, the Master's eyes had not been closed, but open, their irises stubbornly gray in the fire's yellow light. Michael sat down. He had to stop walking; he had to focus his energy somewhere else, to think. He thought briefly of Herman, his face slack before the fertilizer shipment, could almost hear the cogs turning in his head. He thought of Margaret laid out on the bed, her body worn to exhaustion. She would be on her back, her legs straight before her, one arm around Debbie beside her, their eyelids closed, their lips and nostrils still. That expansiveness again.

Michael opened his mouth, almost expecting it to bubble out, and felt that the pressure did not dissipate. He rose and put his ear against the bedroom door—still nothing. The knob was room temperature; any heat his wife had left behind was gone.

He heard Debbie's little hard-soled shoes run by the fireplace and through the room. He turned, ready to reprimand her. He was alone.

The kitchen door was ajar, a line of light lay across the

floor. Inside the kitchen was black and still. The air's acrid taste had lifted some, though his nostrils flared and it coated the back of his throat. Debbie was not here either. Through the kitchen's single, grimy window he could see that the fire, like a beacon, still burned.

Stumbling through the desert, Michael felt the expanse pressing against his sides. He was aware too, suddenly, of a second feeling, smaller, resting heavily in his back like an impulse stifled before it could be acted upon. His breath was tearing through his lungs. The sky was deep and black, peppered with pinpricks of light that did not twinkle, but tried to keep that dark at bay and failed. When Michael looked again, the smoke from the fire had blotted them out and the night was like a gasp in an empty room.

Ahead, Torgo was screaming.

"I want her. She's mine mine mine, you hear? You have all the wives you need—look. All of you, thinking how good you are. I don't need you anymore, I'll have my own wife now, I won't have to come here again. *You*, you're the worst, you were his first wife. He doesn't want you anymore, and now even I don't want you."

Michael made no attempt to hide himself as he approached: the night was disguise enough.

Torgo was facing the woman lashed to the column at the Master's head. Her face was impassive, with high, fair cheekbones and a thin, expressionless mouth. Smoke was

billowing from the fire, obscuring Torgo at intervals.

As Michael watched, Torgo raised one shaking hand into the woman's hair, pulling at it so her head shifted on the column, and pushed his face into her side. His breath swayed her pale, sheer gown. His other hand pressed against her breast. Michael came closer, hidden now by a column on the fair side of the circle. The dog growled. Torgo jumped away, startled.

"I'm through with all of you," he said, moving past the Master. He laughed, his braying lingering among the pillars until he got away from the firelight and Michael, straining his eyes, couldn't see him.

He walked past the idol, past the dog—which didn't raise its head but followed him with its white, dead eyes—and let his hand fall where it wanted to: palm open on the Master's chest. Michael went rigid; his hand felt like it was on fire, flames of sweet pain licking up his arm. His eyes rolled into his skull, his head bent back, and that expansive feeling that had been mounting within him for so long burst forth in a low moan.

Michael intoned, *Oh Manos, thou of primal darkness, thou who dwelleth in the depths of the universe, in the black chasms of night, thou who bestoweth darkness upon thy faithful, return to the earth, make it most blessed forever, and curse with eternal burning light those who transgress against thee. Holy art thou holy art thou. Manos' will be done.*

Michael collapsed to the ground; tears were streaming down his face and he doubled over, vomiting blood. Torgo had outlived his usefulness long ago. Manos' will be done.

Margaret woke up against something hard, smooth, and cold. Her face wet with sweat, tears, and saliva, the light she had left on flared on one side of her vision, consuming it. There was nothing but blackness before her. Blackness. Her legs felt weak and useless. Part of her wondered why she wasn't falling over, but any shift of her head made her dizzy. If she moved, she would fall into the black, down to its bottom, and be swallowed up by it while the light got smaller and smaller until it too was blotted out and there wasn't even her, just the black and the dark and the cold. Her hands were numb, but she could see them at the lip of the darkness, rattling against the wall or the floor—she didn't know which. Dust billowed around her head from her frantic breathing. Instantly, she felt Torgo behind her, lying on his belly like a snake. If she turned around, his jaw would unhinge. If she turned around, his jaw would unhinge and he would eat her. But Debbie was still here, somewhere. Her tiny arm flopped over the side of the bed and dangled almost to her mother's face. Margaret touched it, so it was real. Her daughter next to her was like an island she longed to reach, bobbing in and out of sight as her eyes blinked with agonizing slowness. She dared to look around, to get her bearings. Torgo was not there.

Her legs were wedged beneath the bed's cruel wooden frame. Unsticking one, and then the other, Margaret slid them out and laid on her back, breathing. Shakily, she pulled herself up and sat before the mirror. Her makeup had run in rivulets across her face. She wiped it away with the heel of her hand, but her eyes remained shadowy and bloodshot.

Debbie was still asleep. Margaret opened the front of her dress and slid it off, finding she was still in her full slip and it was much cooler. She could see the window on the opposite wall and the dark night beyond. She folded her dress and put it on top of her bag. She glanced in the mirror and saw Torgo's worn and hungry face against the glass, the brim of his hat flattened up. She gasped and spun around, but the window showed nothing. The mirror, too, showed only the dust against the pane.

"Mommy?" Debbie was awake, but she wasn't sitting up as Margaret had expected. She stared out from beneath cobwebs of hair, her eyes dim in the light, eerily calm. Her mouth closed slowly, easing itself from the bloated *y* of the word. "Where's Daddy?"

Margaret ignored the question. She was aware of a rumbling unlike the car's guttural frustrations. Debbie said something Margaret didn't catch as she strained her ears to identify the sound.

Two voices.

She pressed her head against the door and turned the key,

listening for any hiccup in the conversation. They were close. She could feel the tumblers sliding into place, the bolt moving closer to its locked position.

“Where’s Daddy?” Debbie’s voice, suddenly so near and distinct, startled her, and the bolt popped the last few millimeters. The voices stopped.

And then she heard someone cry out, a heavy thud against the wall and floor as something big fell and, most horribly, as she stared into Debbie’s face, her pupils dilating so the girl became one bright candle and the bulb the sun shining upon her, labored footfalls moving out of the house and the jerky, hissing sound of a body being dragged.

Michael woke up slowly. A big goose egg swelled painfully from the back of his head, he was wheezing from his mouth, his nostrils gummed with blood, and his hands were bound haphazardly behind his back. He tried to lean forward, but couldn’t. Craning his neck, he could just barely see the rotting fence post he was tied to. He shook his head to clear his vision and felt it throb angrily. He had been trying to find Torgo. His vision faded. He gasped, trying to maintain consciousness. The night was still dark and impenetrable; he must not have been out of it for too long. There was a light in the distance.

He stood, and big splinters grabbed at his sweater, tearing it. He managed to get his hands over the end of the

post, and felt a mad laughter threatening to break his surface: The fool Torgo had obviously not thought this through. He shook the bounds, his own belt, from his hands, and stumbled toward the light, ignoring the brush and sparse cacti reaching for him.

Torgo was on the slab, the Master looking upon him, speaking softly. The women were standing around them, swaying with the cadence of the Master's voice. Michael couldn't see the dog.

The women stopped swaying.

"You have betrayed us, Torgo."

"No," Torgo wailed, his voice rang through the columns. He tried to sit up, but the hands clung to him, wrapping him in their stony fingers, and he was forced still. "No, Master, I haven't. I've kept watch over the tomb, I've cared for you and your wives while you slept."

The women rustled anxiously, their gowns seeming to hover above the dirt.

"My wives have told me about your visits here, Torgo. They may not react, but they can hear everything you say, and," he put up a hand, the women's muttering silenced, "*feel* everything you do. You have become increasingly neglectful of your duties, Torgo. And neglect of your sort does not go unnoticed for long. Why do think I saw fit to summon another?"

"But you were asleep," Torgo whimpered. "I know you

were asleep.”

“Yes, I was sleeping. But you should know better than anyone, Torgo, that the power Manos has bestowed upon me never slumbers. It *rages*.” He leaned close to Torgo’s face, “As Manos has decreed, so shall they eat of your flesh, so shall Manos devour your bones, so shall you be a sacrifice, Torgo. Soon I will seek them. Say the words, Torgo, say them as I taught you so that in consuming you they too will learn and be made obedient.”

Torgo's face, hidden in the bosom of night, turned toward the heart of the fire. His lips moved, but Michael could not hear what he said. His eyes were glassy.

The Master touched Torgo’s forehead and stepped away. He opened his arms wide, and his cloak billowed around him. Michael could see the designs in full for the first time—two huge hands, as red as blood welling from a cut, with spread fingers awash in complex runes and markings, hundreds of them—and he turned his face to the black veil of night and began to chant.

As the Master chanted louder and louder, the women took it up so their voices rose over the hiss and pop of the fire. *Thy priesthood remains steadfast, thy priesthood remains constant, thy priesthood remains righteous. Thou hast brought us, oh Manos, and we have listened. Hear our words, oh Manos, hear us for we are faithful and thou art our god. Manos, god of primal darkness, as thou hast decreed so have*

we done. The hands of fate have doomed this main. The will of Manos shall be served.

Michael walked the last steps to a pillar dizzily; he was drunk with the chanting, drunk with the ritual he had never seen but knew in the dark recesses of his heart. Something touched his hand. It was the dog's muzzle: its dead eyes looked up at him like twin moons. Michael stroked its head. The chanting ended, ringing through the pillars, and he heard the Master's steady, commanding voice calling for sacrifice—Torgo's sacrifice—to appease the will of Manos. The Master stepped into the shadows so that Michael could only make out the red icons on his robe.

The women began to dance around the slab, around the idol, and the smoke, like their gowns, swirled around their bodies as they moved forward and back, seeming at times to float in the air. The dust at their feet billowed around their legs, mixing with the smoke, and Michael lost track of them and saw only their movement, their undulations in the air. Torgo appeared on high, borne upon the hands of the women, and the Master was beside them. They laid him in the fire, and Michael winced as the acrid smell of burning flesh and hair filled his lungs.

The flames climbed higher, he could feel the heat from where he stood, and the dog was gone, and he couldn't see the Master or his wives because he was staring into the fire, into the oily black smoke.

Torgo screamed, one high, long scream, the sound of the life rushing from him into the night. Even as Torgo screamed, the Master began to laugh, and Michael saw him hold something aloft. It was Torgo's hand on fire, and it glowed like a star.

Michael appeared in the room as if in a dream. She couldn't remember unbolting the door, but she must have. He said they were going to leave: they were going to get help. She could hear his footsteps: she felt the slight vibrations through the floor as his weight fell upon it, so he was really there. He kissed Debbie and hugged her, smiling.

She was dressed again, the shoes on her feet felt as light and insubstantial as air. And then they were out, following the dancing beam of the flashlight, Michael beside her. She could feel some darkness at their heels propelling them, but breathed deep the night air and went on.

Michael was not sure if they were headed in the right direction. The sky unrolled around them, an endless expanse of stars in every direction. The expansive feeling which had before welled inside of him saturated the air around them, pushing in. The hard, small feeling in his back flickered under the pressure.

No one spoke.

The desert beneath his feet was the same patch repeated into infinity. The valley was a drain they were circling.

Michael closed his eyes. He felt that he could move through this place forever, but they were coming to the end. They were so close.

“What?” He stopped, suddenly aware that his wife was talking to him. She was a few paces away, her head down.

“Michael, I don’t think we should be here,” her voice was low and terrified. “I keep seeing people just out of the corner of my eye, and I don’t like it, I don’t like it, Michael.” She took a step forward, and then drew back, regretting it. “They’re not there when I look up, but *they’re following us*.” She hissed the last three words, plainly trying to keep her voice down. Debbie put her arms around her mother, who screamed and pushed her away. Debbie looked at her, uncomprehending, tears welled in her eyes.

“No, Debbie, it’s okay, Mommy didn’t mean it.” Margaret pulled the girl close; she went limp in the embrace. “You surprised me, but it’s okay, I know you didn’t mean to.” She started to sob, about scaring Debbie, about the desert, about how she was so scared she felt paralyzed. “Mike,” she cried out, “Let’s go back. To the light.” The moon shone on their backs so they looked for all the world like a single trembling stone, the shadows of their hair falling to one side. Michael felt strangely distant from them and from his own body, standing in the desert in the night among the bushes and cacti and animals scurrying to their burrows. He felt like there was some small part of himself out of sync, it was

looking for something he could not identify. They were at least a mile from the house.

“I just want it to be over.” Her face looking up at him just three more shadows.

“I know,” he said.

The kitchen was bathed in shadow. Margaret moved slowly, aimlessly, running her hands over the cupboards and counters, lingering on the faucet handles. She did not look out the window; they all knew the fire was still burning. Michael rested his palms on the counter, waiting. The gun was heavy in his pocket: he had forgotten about it. Debbie was standing by the closed doorway. She hadn't spoken since they began the walk back, but Michael could hear her sniffing.

Margaret was not surprised to see the dog. It sniffed Debbie's arm and licked it. For an instant, Margaret saw a stump, chewed and bleeding, but the dog moved away and she was untouched. It sniffed at Michael and at last came to Margaret, stale breath billowing from its flat nose, its eyes dim in the gloaming. It nuzzled her leg. She couldn't breathe. Her heart was a caged animal begging for its freedom. The living room was bright. Michael had no desire to fire on the Master. He took a step back; the Master was staring at him, at Debbie, at Margaret. The floor seemed to slide out from under him, and his vision blurred, his hand brushing Margaret's leg, his fingers pressing against the thin fabric of her dress, and

the thing inside of him clicked: it found what it had been searching for. The Master's head tilted back. His gray eyes still bored into Michael's: the catch was released, and the thing he had possessed so briefly was lost.

A car pulls off to the side of the road under the ominous peal of thunder, the automatic top raises itself over the convertible and the two women inside it like a blanket.

"Do you know where we are?"

"Me? You have the map." The wipers move rhythmically on the glass. The woman in the passenger seat checks the hand-drawn map Freddie had dictated the day before. It is incomplete, missing whole roads and landmarks, a muddled thing.

"Well? Come on," the driver says. "The gang's waiting for us; we should've been there an hour ago."

"Just keep going, this road has got to come out somewhere."

"I swear."

The landscape moves by slowly, the tires kick up tendrils of dirt. They drive for another ten minutes in silence; rain drops splatter on the windshield and are wiped away. The storm the clouds threaten rests in the sky.

She stops at a small dusty house. The door is closed. The front is bare and windowless. She leans to get back into the car.

"No one here."

“Wait, Joan. Look.”

There is a man standing on the steps. He has short, dark hair; his clothes looked like they have not been properly cleaned, left to time to be made new. His arms are limp at his side.

“Hello?” she ventures.

“Welcome, I am Michael,” the man says. “I take care of the place while the Master is away.”

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