

W. Parrott Howard

1/28/21

In All That Dark and All That Cold

And in the dream I knew that he was goin' on ahead and he was fixin' to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold. And I knew that whenever I got there, he'd be there.

And then I woke up.

~ Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*

Author's Note: The following constitutes a story a strange man relayed to me one night while at El Jismo on the Border. In the spirit of transparency, I was nearly blacked out when it was being told and so it may not be 100% accurate but I did the best I could. I also took some liberties with the strange man's story to make it more compelling to audiences who've never been on the other side of the Border.

The truth about Bendrikin's irrelevance and tenuous grip on existence reveals itself dramatically and inescapably, even for the most stubbornly ignorant of travelers, when approached from the south. The main - the only - street (henceforth referred to as Primary Thoroughfare, a name favored by the Bendrikinese precisely because it is an affront against vocal chords) is framed by the menace and the majesty of the Frosties behind and to either side: a peninsula of civilization encroaching on a stark landscape of snow which erases all memories of warmth; the Frosties gleaming white incisors soaring ever upwards which threaten to chomp down on Bendrikin at any second. The collection of a dozen or so buildings - a few houses, a saloon, a church, a jail, a bank, a general store - spew insignificant black smoke from their chimneys, tentacles of manmade darkness intruding into the sky, which is otherwise white and blue and beautiful.

It is a small town, populated by the disillusioned and the forgotten, like if the Island of Misfit Toys was actually situated in a gritty hyper-realistic HBO crime drama instead of fucking Rudolph where they're somehow still dignified enough to have a goddamn throne room; so, due to sheer disinterest, and also general lack of sentience, externally visible wrongdoing is rare. When it does occur, typically in the form of petty crime, such as stolen clothes or the like, folk are usually too miserably myopic to protest much. But when a dozen young men's brains and blood are found smeared in the snow like a Basquiat imitation authored by a coked-up and highly demonstrative Crayola salesman who exclusively markets the color red, the people of Bendrikin had to take note.

Leonard Vine, however - eyes twinkling so brightly they prevented everyone he met from noticing anything about him other than their brilliance, and which rendered the more socially inept characters he would come across unable to speak - was not nonplussed (but was he *plussed*??, you may ask - and that I cannot answer) by Bendrikin's frankly poorly planned topographical placement. He saw a virgin landscape which spoke to mystery and adventure over every snow-topped ridge; a land far from the prying eye of the Law, away from the oppressive heat and crowded alleys of Picolero: in a word, he saw freedom.

Until he too saw the bodies, that is: the abstract absurdity of twelve bled-out young men - his own age, or thereabouts - with corpses so pale they were effectively camouflaged by the snow, as if they were going to sink permanently into this layer of white monotony and die a second death, suffocating and frozen until the next summer, during that period of time briefer

than a Calvin Klein magazine when the snows melted this far north. But it was impossible to miss the spilled vital blood, no matter how tightly one shut their eyes and stuck their fingers in their ears with their tongue out la-la-la-ing, furiously clinging, like a drowning person, to the notion that this sort of thing could never occur on Primary Thoroughfare.

Leo's trained eye was disgusted by the lack of discipline these slayings implied. There was no order here, no conforming to standard practices of manslaughter which gunslingers had championed in order to sleep at night since the first ships landed at Kiyo centuries ago; it was a Jackson Pollock inspired bacchanalia hosted by Jeffrey Dahmer. Whoever had killed these men and mangled their corpses - flayed faces, missing fingers, a severed toe protruding from a belly button (itself a vaguely phallic reminder of the fact that the majority of these men had gaping chasms where their penises (presumably) were once located) - had done so with no rhyme or reason or respect for the human body. Leo dropped from his horse to examine the dead human beings more closely, simultaneously repulsed and fascinated by this statement of anarchy and the primordial so unlike anything ever seen in the desert.

With his head bowed as if in spectral communication with the dead, genuflecting above the corpses like one might after arriving at a cathedral which is the final destination of a pilgrimage which started before they were born, though they couldn't have known it, the doors to the Diamond Factory flew open. Out poured the Blooms and the Ruskins and other Bendrikin royalty, who could instantly tell by this interloper's fine blonde hair, orange silken duster, and well-fed and well-muscled black horse (which, though they had never ridden one while being pursued by trigger happy outlaws with no teeth for hours through the swamps near Mosquito (dodging alligators all the while), recognized as being from a line of horses ridden only by the most promising gunslingers who called the Mesa home) that he wasn't from around here.

Yelling followed. "Son, get away from those bodies! Those men are dead, leave 'em be!" Leo looked up quickly, saw a rabble of indistinguishable old men with contorted, constipated faces screaming at him, his vision flicking from hip to hip, checking for threats of violence, years of training kicking in which would forever dictate his every encounter with a stranger. But none of these men were carried guns: "Sorry, folks. I thought they were the only ones in town. I'll give it a year and come back."

The men were taken aback by the boy's insolence. Largely speechless, they muttered amongst themselves while Leo returned to his appraisal of the slaughter scene, which could be

viewed alternately as a post on some sort of vampiric food porn Instagram account. Night soon fell on the town and Ma Brooks - who ran the Diamond Factory and served as the town's unofficial therapist and resident matronly figure - was putting dinner on the table so the tired old men traipsed back inside and ate in a miserly silence, leaving Leo Vine, the young gunslinger from Picolero, alone to study man's self-destructive capabilities in all that dark and all that cold.

The expressions on the corpses - those whose faces remained intact, that is - were expressions of bliss, as though billions of their cells had not severed themselves from the rest of the body (or if they had then they had done so with their cerebral compatriots' blessings), as though everything - in their bodies, their souls, and in the world around them - was right where it should be. Some of their blood remained frozen on their skin; Leo noted that the moon's light reflected through these sanguine prisms so that their bodies appeared adorned with dazzling rubies.

Leo went into the saloon shortly thereafter, ignoring the sullen glances thrown his way by the disgruntled and offended people, all of whom were of grandparent-y age, all of whom had their own sad sad songs which would go a great deal to explaining why they were the way they are but which Leo, in his selfishness, which is inculcated from a young age in all gunslingers, never stopped to consider or try to learn.

They sat there slurping lukewarm soup and sucking down beers.

The passage of time wore heavy on the walls of the Diamond Factory: the saloon's sky blue wallpaper, which, for most of the year, contrasted quite evocatively and sentimentally with the near-incessant blizzards raging outside, was peeling, dust gathered on empty stools and tables - that framed gold encrusted pickaxe hanging above the bar counter, a testament to the town's former (certainly not glory, but like an e-list celebrity's sort of) relevance, was the only indication that Bendrikin wasn't letting itself disintegrate back into a void of nothingness: for it was polished immaculately, like a small-town art museum somehow housing a Degas piece which went chronically underappreciated by the local yokels; it greeted you upon entering more warmly - in all of its metallic haughtiness - than any guest or employee ever would.

Leo's eyes were drawn to the shelves behind the counter, dimly lit by the gas lamps and candles which sat on the tables and on the counter; the chandelier had burned out years ago and no one saw fit to replace it - there was no need. Alcohol had not been a part of Leo's life back in Picolero, though everyone knew it was an essential part of being a gunslinger; it was necessary

to occasionally forget everything and cede control to a higher power when most of your existence consisted of grappling with humanity's darkest deeds and doing things which would probably be looked back on with scorn by future generations if that pattern holds where we become pretty critical (and, in most cases, rightly so) of our ancestors' practices, which may have seemed more humane in their day. Leo had a brief, terse exchange with Ma Brooks at the bar - feeling the town's eyes on his back as they spoke, a sensation which by now, after nearly two decades, felt like a second skin - and walked up the steps to his boarding room with his pistol on his side and a large bottle of whiskey in each hand; the liquor, which promised a night of soul-searching and sloppiness, clashed visibly with his stern and regal posture - a Picoleran trademark, where abdominal exercises are performed daily by all citizens who haven't given up yet, in practice for the triannual Straightback Games in which contestants are forced to stand still and upright, their entire bodies perpendicular to the ground, like a statue of some long dead Roman general, until only one person is left standing (and the rest of them have passed out from starvation and/or sleep deprivation, not including that one particularly scorching year when Greg Protto died from heat exhaustion and a group of concerned mothers wrote a letter to the Sheriff which was promptly used as toilet paper).

Leo's room, like the rest of the saloon and indeed the region at large, was spartan: a bed, creaking floorboards, and a shuttered window: intriguingly ajar, inviting Leo, whose superstitious enthusiasm and curiosity combined to lead him to believe that whatever he would see from this window, so tantalizingly just the slightest bit open, would be the single most important image he had seen in his entire life: he could just make out a stubborn evergreen tree standing proud through the darkness and the now thickly falling snow seemingly in defiance of the barren tundra around it. Presumably this arboreal monarch would put to shame even the most maniacally fit Picoleran.

Too exhausted from the ride to do anything but what his body demanded - sleep - Leo stripped naked and climbed into bed. The chill was a relief to him after years of night sweats in Picolero. The whiskey sat untouched on the floor beside his bed. He hadn't yet decided whether or not to dump it out in the morning, likely peering nervously over his shoulder the entire time, alone and afraid in the snow while Bendrikin and everyone else in the world would still be tucked nicely away in their cozy beds.

Leo's 18th year, his last before Bendrikin. In Picolero now. Home. On top of the Mesa: a natural vista to see the desert in all of its sublime beauty and terror and other feelings that words can't do justice: but buildings - and, in them, windows, with curious, searching, hopeful, and occasionally reproachful eyes (mostly blue in this part of the Jurisdiction) peeking out, sort of choosing to be seen trying to not be seen, in some weird high society sort of game which you either understand when you're 7 years old or die uninitiated - block the view of cracked rock and sunbaked cacti.

Moving through the ceramic corridors of Picolero with an ease and a comfort which can only come from living there your entire life: Leo, a cigarette drooping from his lips, like one of those small fish which they would have you believe clings onto great whales in the depths of the ocean. Days in the Picolero summer are long, and hot: the desert sun seemingly always directly overhead, a solar panopticon; the heat of the pavement necessitates footwear (which at least lends some intrinsic value to shoes); the only water to be found naturally for a hundred miles is sweat dripping from chins and armpits and scrota: but the winters are pleasant there.

But it is the summer, and, more specifically, nighttime here and now: the desert moon, dusk's mellow response to the furious, dynastic omnipresence of the sun during this season, reclines on a blanket of stars as if attending a cosmic picnic like the laissez-faire mother Leo never had. After a day of performing - the golden child, a receptacle for the hopes and dreams of his parents and everyone else who saw him as this unholy investment which must soon start returning profits given all of the resources it was force-fed - Leo got to enjoy the peace and quiet brought on by solitude at night in the dark on the Mesa.

To many children in Picolero, summer nights meant stupidity: drunken dares near the cliffs, a time to lose control, to be swept up, even if just for one day, in the winds of life; this adolescent feeling, difficult to describe (and Leo wouldn't have recognized it, given the situation) that it is essentially you against the world but you have found these other people, these other human beings, who you actually genuinely love, even if you won't admit it to yourself, and who you will fight for, and occasionally with as well, but who ultimately serve as a modicum of tolerability for living in the world, and you know deep down that it is all going to end but you

don't really care until you do but then it's already too late: fun, in another word. Leo was not stupid and he did not have fun and he was on his way to meet the Sheriff in his Office.

Which stood like a disapproving father looking out over the crowded adobe rooftops of Picolero. The Sheriff's Office was the only wooden building on the Mesa and it was also the only building over two stories tall: seven, in fact: it closely resembled Will Ferrell at the North Pole in *Elf*, but approximately 64370167.02 times more sinister and foreboding. Though unknown to most of the public - the Law must remain mysterious for it to function properly - the seven stories were actually just six flights of empty stairs leading up to a circular room at the top, like a pancake - or something else biodegradable and consumable, transient like - which someone had smushed on top of a Jenga tower.

The building's interior was torchlit: fire warnings - which didn't exist, to be fair - be damned. Remarkably, in what could be determined as an affirmation (or a condemnation, depending on your politics) of the Mandate of Heaven, the Sheriff's Office had gone unblazed for the century plus it had stood in this very spot - since Sheriff Mikel Bob and the first Deputies arrived on the Mesa. The torches cast a harsh light which accentuated the high cheekbones and square jaws of former Deputies who had protected the Jurisdiction and whose portraits lined the walls, emanating that unavoidable horror movie feeling of eyes moving, following every move you make with the unspoken assurance that someone can jump out of the walls or down from the ceiling and end your life if they're so moved; Leo climbed these steps currently, up up and away into the night sky, physically moving through generations of earlier gunslingers, none of whom, as the legends told it, had ever set a foot wrong.

It should also be said that for many Picolerans climbing six flights of stairs was quite literally too tall a task.

But Leo was not many Picolerans - for better or for worse - and ascended this temple to man's ingenuity, his desire for opulence, his greed and his pride, and, yet, still, his technical ability, while other children played with their friends contentedly down in oblivion, children forging or fashioning some sort of second family, a group whose love was not cheapened by the unconditional terms of blood, out there on the cliffs under the half-light of the desert moon.

Once on the seventh landing, Leo had to climb a ladder through a trapdoor to reach the Sheriff. The Sheriff's office in the Sheriff's Office was devoid of all signs of life: no decorations, only three weak torches which cast a worryingly evaporation-prone puddle of light around the

desk in the middle of the room (this inner sanctum far gloomier than the staircase) and a ring of windows from which the Sheriff could look down on the sleeping city like a medieval sorcerer peering into an all-seeing crystal ball.

When Leo's head popped timidly out of the trapdoor, akin to a gopher in Whack-a-Mole which had achieved sentience and was fully aware of the legitimately tragic mechanical circumstances which necessitated its jaunt out of the womb of the machine (for air? no, to be bashed repeatedly on the head by shit eating grins for eternity), the Sheriff was staring at him intently - as does a mother on Christmas, waking up to their 6 year old child's face hovering over their own, their innocent eyes already hinting at the reflected sorrow of prisoners and spurned lovers everywhere, all clinging to some notion that tomorrow will be better, that this too shall pass: the child then opens their presents and all is right in their world - yet, still, for the observant, this too shall pass: Christmas is kinda fucked up. The Sheriff was 47 years old, raven-haired, cropped short, with large sad eyes and a thin mouth which was shut tightly and firmly, as if to keep all words, and therefore all thought, from entering into the owner's head.

Leo knew why he was here. His manners, typically more reliable than the absence of Deputies in the lawless wilds betwixt Maize and Picolero, deserted him; the words and expressions he had been trained to adopt since infancy left him high and dry, like a single cloud, formerly blocking the sun's rays in the middle of the sand dunes, which had decided to dissipate and leave whatever humans may be straggling down there to die. Leo's heart was beating too quickly to do anything other than smile awkwardly at this man who would never know the influence he had over the boy before him. The Sheriff had a tired expression on his face. The time had come for Leo to finalize the decision he had started making years ago, that morning before sunrise on the roof of the library, that last morning when the darkened desert could have held everything instead of nothing: continue training to become a Deputy, or retire into comfort, and an already expiring celebrity? In the Sheriff's left hand was a revolver: a gaudy orange with ivory inlays which signified that the carrier was a gunslinger graduated from the Goblin Camp. In his right hand was nothing, which said everything: you're fucking useless. Never you mind living happily with Abigail (but oh! how that ship had left harbor years ago) until one of you dies, which could be tomorrow (or, on the other hand, maybe never, when you think about it precisely the right amount, with just the right mix of metaphysics, marijuana, theology, and

existential logic), or going and joining the other people your age who are making the memories which will make it all worth it later on.

Leo locked eyes with the Sheriff, now standing upright aside the trapdoor. With not a word from either male, both there with different reasons, Leo grabbed the revolver, bowed deeply to the Sheriff and turned his back on him for what would be the first and the last time.

Leo returned home thereafter, walking Picolero for the first time as an official gunslinger. His parents would be so proud! 18 years of all work and no play, of sunrise shootouts and sprints, of turning the other cheek, even, especially, when the other guy *really* fucking deserved it, of never letting anyone in, because then he wouldn't ever have moments like this one: another night coming back home alone through the city he had never really left.

His parents were sound asleep when he arrived home.

Leo spent the rest of the night alone with his thoughts.

He set out from the Diamond Factory - cloaked in its stench of sorrow and regret and despair and remorse - that morning.

The night before, while Leo wallowed in his room reliving that Picoleran night from several years ago and a blizzard manifested outside, snow battering relentlessly against the besieged shuttered window, Bendrikin sprang to life - or, perhaps more accurately, farted out some weak semblance of a life, which, all the same, was the best it could muster; the townspeople met in the dining room to discuss the incident on Primary Thoroughfare. The Diamond Factory had not seen this much activity since Bendrikin was founded two generations ago during more optimistic and nobler times in the Jurisdiction - as all times which came before us inevitably and invariably are - as a final bastion of civilization before the Frosties embarrassed any notions of grandeur and sophistication.

No one from Bendrikin would be flighty enough to brutally murder and mutilate these young men, it would require too much effort and too much activity in the world outside of one's own skull, of which - and this must be stressed, and, if I may be so bold, even annotated by more enthusiastic readers, as it is terribly essential to understanding the rest of what happened in that place during these days - there was a great dearth in Bendrikin. This soundproof logic -

Bendrikin folk are indeed too worried about their own survival to influence definitively someone else's - led the Blooms and the Ruskins, each wearing 12.6 gallon hats (a slight upgrade on the previous year's 12.3 gallon hats; the two clans constantly strove to outdo one another in showiness of headgear (and other arenas) while not admitting to the others - or to themselves, though they never thought that deeply - that they were doing so, hence the incremental increases in size and height of hat) and their cronies to conclude that the surely psychopathic criminal must be a madman come down from the mountains - where nobody had a fucking clue what was going on, motherfuckers could be distilling moonshine from piss and running it all the way to Mosquito for all they knew; logic ended at the border of the Gawaji - under the cover of darkness. The crowd in the Diamond Factory understood this notion - a rational solution to a question which posed irrational complications, like choosing to answer "What do you think your purpose in life is? Do you even have one? Do I?" with "I don't know I just want a cheeseburger leave me alone and go cry in your room some more."

Not understandable, at least by those hardy folk in Bendrikin, but, fortunately for Leo's image, also not seen: the young Picoleran, that slinking vagabond, creeping along through the snowy field behind the saloon, like a spy in some foreign intelligence headquarters, where being seen means being dead, making painstakingly sure to cover his tracks (in the unlikely event that the snow stopped and his footsteps were evident for all to see; too paranoid is not something that exists after all); the same large whiskey bottle from the evening prior in each hand, the volume still the same in each, on his way to empty them somewhere out there where his shame would go unfound. In the dead of the night, finally alone, with that one miraculous tree as the only sign of organic life in sight, if one had night vision goggles that is, away from daytime's ceaseless stare, which was like a swarm of gnats which won't leave you alone, Leo poured out the whiskey, crying silent tears of doubt and of embarrassment, of the knowledge that he was nothing more than a puppet on a stage, controlled by an audience which neither pitied him nor watched his play for any longer than it took for another playwright with a newer, younger, better thespian to open in the theater next door; he knew that the liquor's fire - his romantic euphemism for any rumored psychotropic side effects which accompanied the less romantic realities of possible liver failure and other aesthetic drawbacks on the slippery slope of alcoholism - was too weak to make a dent in the cold which was a fact of life in Bendrikin.

In the morning, clothed again, and more or less rested (physically speaking), Leo bid adieu to the soulless empty room with the view of the tree for the time being. He sketched a quick image of the room in his journal. Downstairs, the vacant saloon seemed to amplify all of the conversations not taking place. Whatever life and community had once dwelt in Bendrikin had gone elsewhere.

At the bar, Leo ate his bacon and bread while Ma Brooks ogled him from behind the counter, making no effort to hide her gaze. She did not offer any of her trademark advice, which was all well and good because Leo would not have accepted it anyway.

Some minutes later, after a silence which was increasingly becoming the status quo in Leo's life since setting out from the Mesa a week or so ago, one of the old men from the previous night boomed in from the wind - which carried on it more snowflakes than a mega convention of every college educated urbanite worldwide under the age of 30 - and plopped a handwritten letter next to Leo's plate with naught but a stern glance.

"GUNSLINGER!" it read, "we in Bendrikin know not your name, nor your face, nor do we care. You carry yourself as fits one of the great Lawmen of the Jurisdiction, yet your body holds no scars and your eyes still sparkle. The brilliance and pomp of your guns speaks of another world where things can take root and grow.

We watched you last night as you studied the corpses. We, the village elders, have decided that it was an outsider.

We believe that you have been sent here for a reason. The villain surely fled into the wilderness and mystery of the Gawaji.

We too were young once, gunslinger. We did not have this opportunity."

After reading it, a grin spread slowly yet disastrously on Leo's angelic face like strep throat being passed around in a kindergarten classroom, and it was not exclusively due to the fact that these hicks had the combination of ignorance and courage necessary to refer to themselves as "village elders" and whoever killed those guys as "the villain." Leo, sharper now than he had ever been - now that distractions were gone entirely - knew that the people of Bendrikin were exploiting every young gunslinger's most cherished desire: to answer the challenge of previous generations, to win the acceptance and admiration of the masses: to become legend. Leo, though fully aware of his pride (or maybe he told himself that it was both his biggest strength and his biggest weakness but just wanted to be different from everyone else in the end and so continued

to roll with it but what do I know), knew too that he was essentially helpless to overcome this DNA-encoded flaw and immediately envisioned himself returning triumphantly to Picolero, where a parade was in planning to celebrate the Deputization of one of the Mesa's native sons; and then, like being struck by a speeding train which has somehow gone so far off the rails that it has penetrated deep into the woods of a protected civic park, his mind's eye risked a peek through his mind's fingers at the opposite side of the coin but then quickly stopped doing that because thinking that way is genuinely terrifying. But of course he must ride off into the jagged unknown shadows of the Frosties to discover the truth about the heinous display of pathological inhumanity! This nameless, formless foe must be found out!

Outside, behind the saloon, winds howled and swirled chaotically, a labyrinthine maelstrom of destiny, a tempestuous waystation where fates weaved and bobbed and zigged and zagged and, sobbing, embraced, fiercely intertwined! The young sapling, alone in the field of otherwise unmarked snow, quavered in the wind, a young chess prodigy's lip suffering their first defeat. Pine needles fell only to be immediately buffeted by low-riding thermals which swept them up, up toward the sky: green darts flying through the snow, momentarily defying gravity.

Bendrikin is a few frozen fields away from the beginning of a great wood: the Gawaji. The Gawaji extends for miles back into the valley which Bendrikin affronts; a collapsed artery of silence and death, a realm of nightmares and of the culmination of slow acting poisons where skeletons dance in an infernal not-light which infiltrates the walls of your mind like that guilty pleasure pop song which you've come to love, really and truly, until you swear autotune and recycled bass lines are the only things you've ever known.

In that way it is like all forests: the Gawaji radiates foreboding, as if some corrupt government performed a brain experiment on death row inmates and college students where scientists surgically removed the part of the human brain which experiences dread, despair, angst; then got the nation's best, most visionary chefs to create a concoction stinking of such apathy and moral depravity that even the most pretentious of culinary douchebags (those who swear by rotting French cheeses, like that grand statement is supposed to mean something to the

rest of us who were raised on Kraft) wouldn't come near it; before lastly dropping it down on this place, where it would hopefully never affect anybody: only it had.

But from where Leo was perched - up high on a cliff on one of the mountains to the west of Bendrikin, a spot which would be deemed a "scenic overlook" on a special blue sign if such things had crossed the Border to the Jurisdiction - the Gawaji looked positively serene, like an orchestra just before the lights come on and the music starts, or a neighborhood of the little people who live under the floorboards in old houses when some misguided nostalgia addict comes into the room. From here, Leo could see clearly, forever, in either direction: north, to the Gawaji and to the unknown, and south toward Bendrikin. Leo's gunslinger's eye started taking mental images from every angle, trying to note the interplay of light and shadow at the border of the Gawaji, where the two elemental forces were in permanent conflict with one another and coincidentally served as a masterclass in chiaroscuro.

The intoxicating beauty and power of being able to see so much - a bespectacled spectator in a suit in a suite at a football game, when all of the elite athlete grown men on the field below look like ants, when the operatic drama unfolding, the events which cause people to get tattoos they will later regret - an argument against living in the moment, among others - which births and eradicates friendships, which inspires nations and breeds international love, looks like a paltry reenactment of some half-assed Homeric battle - fully silenced the the sounds of an approaching mountain lion which had been stalking Leo ever since he carelessly left his horse - fucking entitled piece of shit! - hitched at the base of the mountain, unguarded and vulnerable, and began to climb up to this vantage point.

Leo told himself that he needed to know the layout of the surrounding territory later as he consoled the remains of his dead horse, roughly two thirds of which was then dissolving in the mountain lion's stomach acids; gave himself a practical, justifiable reason, something which could be understood by his parents as he arrived - outwardly sheepish and nonchalant, yet with his insides simultaneously on fire and in a hurricane of serrated knives and just generally existential pain, flaming uncryable tears of shame and guilt and a voiceless confession and screaming out to no one when no one else was around - back home in Picolero. Leo fucked up, something he never did: but if it could be understood, then it wasn't a disease, wasn't chronic, it was just a symptom, nothing wrong with the system, simply diagnose the problem and then

proceed with caution until it is forgotten by everyone except for the guilty party - the guilty party - who is cursed with remembering everything.

But in the moment, before the guilt could return, like a stray cat coming back to the most generous and kindest human stranger it knew, Leo's death was delayed by his artistic impulses. Turning around to grab his journal, he saw the mountain lion - gnashing teeth, wary eyes which belied its primal, carnivorous intentions and suggested that this was not the first dreamer with a gun it had stared at reproachfully - prowling towards him, the consequences of every choice he had ever made animalized.

Mountain lions were not found on the Mesa: only snakes and scorpions preyed there, creatures of subtlety whose attacks weren't seen coming until some politico was keeled over and families' wailings were heard some time deep in the night under the bulbous desert moon. So Leo didn't know explicitly that they were man eating predators with an appetite like a morbidly obese man with a sweet tooth at the Golden Corral chocolate fountain after fasting several days to prove to a friend that Hakeem Olajuwon's Ramadan performances were overrated - but he was a clever lad and it came to him naturally, as everything but one thing did.

His guns were in his sack adjacent to his journal; he had taken them out of their holsters while he was scrambling up the rock face - body pressed close to the sheer smooth blankness, fingers searching desperately for a grasp on something, anything, which would keep him from falling down to his death; he would not be able to reach them in time. Behind the mountain lion, two more of its kind appeared, strolling comfortably like two moviegoers discussing that cute young starlet from the pool scene, each internally debating whether or not it was socially acceptable - with society here being defined as the community found in one's own head, the village which has raised every child of this planet - to attempt to file the scene away in some locked chamber of the soul located past several moats and several castles replete with burning tar and the death of chivalrous knights fighting for their lords, really their ladies, for later rigorous physical appreciation of the variety which some would baselessly claim causes blindness in select cases in adolescent children; if they could immorally consume it, if they could steal this human being's performance and fashion it to their own perverse wants, this person who was giving everything to be something for someone, or maybe for everyone, or maybe just for themselves.

Rational and pragmatic when the situation called for it, which was rarely, in a childhood which had seen mostly only fancy and whimsy, like a “fan” of Batman who had only seen the Adam West TV show - great though that may be - Leo knew fighting these beasts was not an option. He envisioned scraps of his skin and body raining down on the ground below like a scene from a remix of *Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs* directed by exceptionally ravenous vultures. Neither was flight: Leo was a precociously talented gunslinger and by all accounts a physically capable young man, but he had yet to master the art of surviving several hundred foot falls unscathed.

So Leo, as a last resort, stuck a hand out to the inexorably closing mountain lion, as if in surrender, or begging their forgiveness for a crime he hadn't committed yet still felt remorse for. Or, maybe, his crime was reaching this vista and not yet sharing it with anyone, being a jerk, being a selfish fucking asshole, having been given so much, having taken so much from everyone he had known - the village being in one's head is fucking bullshit, what about the countless mattresses and breakfasts and group study sessions and horsepools and babysitters and all of the other things that go into a Picoleran childhood, stop fucking bullshitting, you're not fooling anyone, you fucking asshole! - and giving none of it back. But he had been reaching for his journal to illustrate and record the scene! He definitely wasn't sitting around up here waiting for the need to pee so that he could fulfill a lifelong dream of his and pee off a place which, if viewed blurred through a lenient lens, qualified as the top of the world! Surely these ruthlessly efficient creatures incapable of anything but killing and consuming would recognize that!

Curiously enough, it seemed that they did: the mountain lion paused at this gesture; so too did the entourage. It was as though this universal symbol of supplication had been heard and accepted, albeit under the unspoken law that it was subject to change at any moment. The mountain lions drew abreast and regarded Leo - shaking from both cold and fear, though still standing tall and proud - warily from about five feet away, the way a mob of cruel hearted playground bullies pauses when they draw blood from the scrawny awkward kid wearing glasses which he sat purposefully with his face inches away from the TV to get because he wanted to look like Harry Potter because he read those books with his mom when everyone else was still learning their ABC's; because they see that he, too, bleeds, that there is some animal connection between these two separate demographics, that on some level they are brothers, siblings in suffering, bonded by a shared final destination if nothing else; like the way you look at a

neighbor on a plane which is going down, that split second of eye contact which contains generations and multitudes and galaxies of experiences and of love, that nod of shared acceptance and resignation - I have never met you before and yet in this moment I know you better than my sister than my father my dog and my home; with some sort of sickening, almost cloying but not quite, in a more disturbed manner, blend of pity and - was it - were the rumors true? - genuine compassion? Or maybe these predatory beasts felt not compassion but pity, pity and a sense of malicious superiority: that this helpless vulnerability standing before them, hands out, in touch with the world, blood protected only by the thinnest layer of skin, blood ready to be spilled and drank whenever the mountain lions felt the moment was right, would actually make a more substantial and fulfilling meal if given more time to ripen, more time to marinate in life's suffering.

A brief stalemate ensued; in Bendrikin, a piece of shit relinquished its grip on an asshole and splashed down in a void in an outhouse - gravity gets everything eventually. In the Gawaji, a stream ran icy and murky, reflecting ghoulish trees, filling the silence with a creaking, gasping, murmur which was somehow inexplicably more off putting than good old fashioned lack of all human noise: that is, auditory reminders that life exists outside of your skin: now up to debate. In the bastard cathedral where Leo Vine would learn the truth, darkness reigned for the 4.5 billionth day in a row (or however long this place had existed, science wasn't that advanced here) and the puppet king which it controlled like a tyrannical dance mom with her poor fucked up kid who never had a chance and was fucking talentless in the first place (but good for her, she believed she was doing what she liked), scurried rat-like and alone through the disorderly stacks of stasis and neglected masterpieces.

Relief and adrenaline coursed through his veins like the rush of a subway train while you are seated on a bench and you were just reading a newspaper before the wind from the train ripped it violently from your grasp and the headlines of acts of war and genocide are replaced by a homeless woman giving a soul-stirring rendition of "Wish You Were Here" and decent human beings are singing along and tears, of something positive this time, for the first time in a long time, spring to your eyes. The mountain lions paced off back down the mountain, down the gentle slope hidden around the back which Leo had unwittingly forsaken in favor of the near-90 degree climb up the hard way, toward their den some distance into the Gawaji - the specifics aren't important because no gunslinger would ever go that far in and be able to return and no

human being not a gunslinger would ever go into the Gawaji in the first place. Lying down in the snow, Leo laughed and sobbed - aloud, blessedly alone, with no one to judge him for his crying, free to express emotions - while making snow angels (a bucket list item for kids from Picolero and its environs) to match the ones surely watching from above.

But there were no angels watching him tenderly and doting like how adults cherish a newborn (who lack the confidence of children to point out that human infants look like a martian's concept of a raisin). There was, however, an eagle, sailing up there alone, dancing to some inaudible beat, putting on an exhibition of mobility and of liberty, seemingly acknowledging that it was a performance and, yet, all the more charismatic and charming for it, still; and the eagle saw everything: land dominated by jagged peaks, alpine lakes, sparse groups of evergreens who didn't get the memo, who were defying nature's odds and existing in this place which really shouldn't be inhabited. To the eagle's right - for it was flying east to west - was an obscene black tumorlike mass which stretched for miles like kudzu along an otherwise spotless white wall. To its left was a small smattering of buildings with smoggy signs of life coming from a few chimneys - promises of warmth and light and family to the educated and optimistic mind. In between those two places lay a small boy, positioned with his arms out perpendicularly to either side like Christ on the cross.

A young boy who had already promised himself too much to ever settle back down to a quiet tutelage in Bendrikin; a young boy who would soon interact with the horror found in the Gawaji; a young boy who would soon learn the truth - out there in all that dark and all that cold - about why someone would do such a thing like that nasty confusion of corpses, pungent and nightmarish, which was Leo's first introduction to life outside of Picolero.

It had been growing louder, replacing the erstwhile pax silencia with a sound wholly foreign to Leo, that child of the desert: running water. A stream which snaked down from a hidden lake somewhere high up in the mountains was Leo's only companion in the Gawaji and he wasn't a Disneyfied Native American so that didn't do his social scene wonders anyway. Leo first heard whispers of currents and ripples soon after entering the Gawaji, before he started seeing a warped sickly reflection of himself around every tree and in the canopy (which hung

low and oppressive like a coffin lid over the stale air), staring out through the darkness, two yellow eyes in an otherwise colorless skull, hideously grinning teeth, smiling at some joke which only this demented imitator was in on, watching his every move, his own worst critic (or at least top 5) given a face and fangs. The stream became more than a repository of hydrogen and oxygen molecules and some mysterious living cellular organism besides; this weak excuse for a river - which doubled as every well-mannered simpleton's worst fear in that it refuted the old adage "still waters run deep," for it was both quite staid and quite shallow - was the only reminder of the outside world, where the sky was blue and eagles flew; the only repudiation to the shadows and the silence.

Suddenly - like that morning when you wake up in your bed before dawn but you can't go back to sleep because you're fucking wired for some reason and you realize, abruptly, heartbreakingly, soulburningly, that all of these people you've known for the past twenty years, all of your friends and your confidants and your minor crushes and the major ones and also the people who you should have spent more time with, if we're being honest; all of those human beings, who will die one day, essentially alone, like you, like me, are going away, and it will never be the same, no more sitting in the underpass and doing nothing and loving it - after unknowable hours spent hurrying through the Gawaji, head down, eyes straight ahead, the stream was before him. Leo, shaken, yes, shaken undeniably by that grinning bastard always watching over his shoulder with the yellow eyes, but still full of the confidence and enthusiasm which accompanies the first legs of all such adventures (certainly not in an effort to break up the monotony of wandering alone through the woods; no, no, not that at all), decided to ford the stream now instead of in the morning. He reasoned that he could then camp for the night and dry by the fire instead of wasting daylight doing so in the morning. Leo's first steps into the stream were uneventful; the parasitic creepy-crawlies which called this place - once feared by all from Bendrikin, when people from Bendrikin knew what fear was, as the Sucking Stream (which was not yet, at least on this side of the Border, trademarked, or even being thought of being trademarked, by some perverse cyberpimp pornography executive who realized that livecams were the future and who possessed a hard-on for both blowjobs and alliteration) - home hadn't yet noticed this boy, this poor intrepid fucker, come to answer questions and dispense justice, who dared intrude on their slumber.

The sensation started at his knees: a strange tickling and what felt like a heated pad of Jell-O slithering from his ankle up toward his crotch, under his rudimentarily waterproofed pants. The chill in the water - enough to drive from the mind any and all foolish desires for ice cream or popsicles for good - seemed to subside around that area. It was a warm, numbing feeling - pleasant enough that Leo paid it no mind as it spread up his torso and beyond to his neck. He continued to wade through the water; his mind again wandered to his annoyingly deceased horse: but Leo was now glad that he was gone, she probably couldn't have navigated the Gawaji without bumping into trees every 6.3 seconds, more (bullshit, NO!) reason it wasn't a fuckup, just a miscalculation; his horse was dead because of him, Leo, but it was better that he was dead and that she wasn't coming back into this mess.

And anyway: this feeling! It promised the end of all pain, everything was beautiful and nothing hurt, nothing needed to be done, just keep existing, jazzing, somehow eternally, in this purgatory of soon expiring bliss. Only on the far bank, reindoctrinated into the subarctic nature of reality - water solidifying on his body at an alarming rate - did the initial orgasmic euphoria wear off; and pain, of the acute and sharp variety, not a dull ache at all, like everyone speculates, rushed in to replace it.

Seconds later, Leo was stripped naked and flailing wildly at his own skin with a hunting blade, stabbing out into the darkness, rarely hitting things because there was almost nothing to touch. Still: his body was covered in gluttonous leeches, gorged on the blood and vitality they had feasted on while Leo glided gracefully - like a career socialite at her first cotillion, aware of the adoring crowds and the poorly concealed erections, and loving it all the more for it - through the stream. Blood - Leo's coveted and precious blood, the same blood the mountain lions had spared, in the knowledge that they would be able to lap it up eventually, after it seasoned farther - splattered the snow around him as some leeches burst, fucking self-destructive lemmings which couldn't recognize too much of a good thing, while others had their stomachs carved open by Leo's knife. It was a frenzy; rush-hour on the 405 with a woman, not your wife or your sister or your daughter, just some woman, sores galore, whom you picked up because why the fuck not, is giving birth, violently, an infinity of microscopic mushroom clouds detonating, in the backseat, and some asshole, again, not anyone you know, just some asshole with a fauxhawk and a grill and an unfortunate neck tattoo, is fucking blaring Metallica at max volume from the speakers, and every other car on the fucking road is some idiot who thinks this is Los Santos and not Los

Angeles, and, for fucks sake, you just wanted to chill and drop a little acid and see the new exhibit at the Broad, man, fuck!

Eventually Leo was able to regain control and all of the leeches either were killed or retreated into the anonymity and ooze of the stream which once deceptively concealed their presence so innocently. The young gunslinger, however, was worse for the wear: his once-flawless skin was an angry map of weeping open wounds and his complexion had gone as white as north London c. 2015 - present. Psychological scars appeared as well: the stakes had risen; the clay jars he had grown up shooting had been removed and behind each was a propped-up head with an expression which suggested an immediately previous indescribably immense fear with an angry red third eye in the middle of the forehead, blood running down their faces with all of the speed and the homicidal intent of a magma flow, indiscriminately swallowing and petrifying everything in its path.

Later that night, as Leo lay in a huddled mass almost on top of the fire, and the young gunslinger struggled to make sense of a world in which some organisms continued existing solely by stealing and slurping and sucking others' blood (and indeed there seemed to be an entire industry, or like an ecosystem at the very least, predicated on this practice), he thought back, before the mountain lion incident, before the hours, which seemed like lifetimes, spent lost in this stifling oppressive darkness, alone with, well not exactly, more like running from, his shadow, scared of his distorted reflection, to the pile of bodies which greeted him upon arrival in Bendrikin. They were a comfortable challenge then, something processed and premeditated and prescribed, like Lunchables in their neat compartmentalized organized irrationality. But for the first time, Leo, himself, stopped, and asked, unprompted: what could propel someone to do such a thing? It isn't enough to chalk up such atrocities to insanity and then pretend that insanity only exists in the boonies, the borderlands, a safe distance from civilization: there would always be those who felt the urge to go to the borderlands, to see the rest of the world and know its mysteries, to frolic in lakes while schools of fish swim shimmering underfoot, to climb the great trees outside of Kiyo and be the first person in all of the Jurisdiction to watch the sunrise, to run through the Wheat Sea, racing the sun to be home before dinner is served so you won't be grounded and will be able to continue building that dam in the creek with your neighbors; to be a fucking human being; the gunslingers, those who realize how fucking extraordinarily lucky they are to be alive, to exist in this time and in this place, who look at how many people are already

dead and how many people haven't been born yet, who realize that, given these frankly ridiculous, surreal circumstances, they must be here for some reason, and then, despite the dogma du jour, actually go out and find what that reason is. For some, for a select and arguably unhealthily dedicated few, this search might take them beyond the edge of the mapped world, where the unknown reigned in monopolistic excess, able to impose exorbitant taxes on everything from oxygen to nostalgia. Leo Vine found himself alone in the Gawaji.

Those bodies, those now unrecognizable human beings, mangled to the point where they could reasonably be taken for melted wax figures onto which some genuinely omnipotent and truly omniscient and really wholly benevolent male tomato deity - not a bloody poser - had ejalucated ketchup: they were there for a reason: someone had done that for a reason: they were dead for a reason. Human beings had died for a reason. So what was it? Who had felt, was even capable of feeling, an emotion so strongly that it prompted them, this mystery figure, who acted on their convictions, to murder these people? What did this person, or these people, know?

In Bendrikin, not a thought was spared for the young gunslinger they had sent out into the Gawaji; the surviving leeches were content in their watery homes. The mountain lions which had allowed Leo to continue existing were circling back around now, moving invisibly in the darkness, watching from a safe distance, smelling the kid's lost blood, realizing that they would not have to wait much longer before pouncing on their prey, tearing skin from bone and bringing the scraps back to their needy cubs to satisfy their clamoring mouths. In the mine shaft where the monster at the end of the dream hid, an old man could be heard softly crying, for he knew, knew who and what was coming his way, knew what he would have to do: but this would be the last time, the last one, one way or the other, a promise made to no one.

Leo settled down for the night a still sniveling and shivering husk. His eyes, the windows to the soul, were shut tightly, forcefully, a fortress intended to prevent his stalker from penetrating into that last refuge, his mind; his body curled tightly and protectively around the fire he had conjured up using the resourcefulness and methods espoused by Deputies on the Mesa. He lay there suffering in the sleeping bag which now hugged his shape - and no one else's - more naturally than any plaster of Paris imitation could ever dream of.

Leo: an insomniac alone in the black velvet embrace of the Gawaji, his mind wandering, a lost soul desperately trying to find a trail of breadcrumbs which he refuses to believe that he could have been so stupid as to forget, able to keep the nefarious forces of his own conscience and of reality at bay only by weaponizing the stubbornness he was routinely reminded of, typically in a pejorative manner, by his elders back on the Mesa. In order to survive out here, in the dark and the cold, by oneself, you had to construct your own plane of existence where the sun still shined, visible-like, and clouds were made of things other than your lungs' breath. It could be the past or it could be the future or it could be a universe away but it couldn't be here. To that end:

It's jazz music. Every note falling perfectly, an improvised drum fill, which burrows into your skin, and then, almost simultaneously, deeper into your heart, to pump your veins with pure energy, to provide flourishes where otherwise there would be silence, and also a bass line running constantly throughout to provide stability and something to fall back on.

It's bliss. Being on top of the world. Twinkling lights shoot by overheard in a drunken blur, hinting at maybe the possibility of life elsewhere, exoplanets where maybe everything isn't as fucked up as stuff here, the windows all the way down while roaring through the highway between the lake and the city, and some angel's voice seems to descend from somewhere up there, from the stars, from the cosmos, where things could, must, be better - not just from the radio (or technically the AUX these days but I haven't been back recently) - and no one else can hear it or feel it or touch it except for you two, but that's OK because there's no one else in the world. The winds outside rage as always, but inside they are still, as if you are, against all logic, matching speeds with the wind; and your life, your human existence, is perfectly in sync with the universe at large - it is one of those rare and fleeting time while living where you feel as if you are exactly where you are meant to be.

It: is early twilight in Picolero: Leo is 15. At this moment he is running along the rooftops of Potter's Row, their steps, the golden couple's, heard and sighed at, remorsefully, and a little longingly too, by the proudly demented - those few indefatigable soldiers who do battle with their demons deep into the night, always unable to remember or explain to others why they have chosen this Sisyphean undertaking (secretly clinging to the unfounded belief that this life chose them) when asked in the morning - who are still awake at this hour. For those asleep, their dreams are momentarily blessed by an extraterrestrial orchestral accompaniment which will be

forgotten upon waking, unless in that strange state of endless possibilities and no consequences - no, not that misspent one - where one is aware they are dreaming, and is still able to ephemerally fool, albeit unconvincingly, their mind that this is reality, and in that case is enjoyed as a revival concert put on by whoever the opposite of Elliott Smith - not in terms of quality but in terms of vibe - is in your book. His long blonde hair streams behind him, a flag announcing beauty and grace and elegance, as he hops from building to building, performing some intricate ballet which, frankly, can't be appreciated by a layperson; the desert opening to his right like a mega sized canvas someone tarred in sepia and then covered in some prickly green things that kind of look like what would happen if someone shot those weird inflatable things outside of car dealerships with a freeze ray while both of their arms were up. Abigail, as she always was in those days, is right by his side.

Abigail and Leo met when they were 12. The first thing Leo noticed about her is that she didn't notice him. Picolero is large for the Jurisdiction (though still small by 21st century earthly measures) but everyone knew Leo, or at least thought they did: his breezy, practiced gait, his wit, his smile, more and more performatory as the years wore on; above all, his reputation as a prodigy, as perfection personified. In the games which Leo loved to dominate in his early childhood - mock rodeos, shooting challenges - but which had recently grown boring, there was new blood. An equal. Someone who refused to grovel at his feet like a beaten, and probably flea-infested to boot, dog, and met his eyes squarely. Someone who, like Leo, realized the absurdity of the system and the society they were raised in, but who went one step farther even, and refused to conform to any of the rules which were held sacred on the Mesa: no participation in arcane shooting rituals which glorified the spilling of blood, no suppressing one's true thoughts and words in favor of communal harmony, choosing to not wear goddamn spurs on her boots, solely because everyone else did, when she would have worn them more convincingly and authoritatively than anyone who wasn't already a Deputy (and Leo, of course). The past 3 years had been the most fruitful and wonderfully symbiotic relationship since lyrically gifted singer-songwriters and painful breakups.

The two young Picolerans soon reached the end of Potter's Row, the buildings reaching right up to the cliff's edge on a promontory which extended out over the desert, like the crest of a luxurious and doomed ocean liner which advertised man's claimed dominion over the high seas. Pausing now, to rest, they saw it all: dunes and rock and flatlands.

“I beat you again.”

Abigail reclined back onto the blankets they stashed on the roof of this building - Picolero's library, its location on the edge of town not a miscalculation - her fiery auburn hair splayed outward like a peacock's plumage, or lines of divine potency radiating from some Hindu goddess of rock and roll and livin. Laughing audibly, a rarity, Leo turned and faced her, the brilliance of his smile now more authentic and raw than a slab of bloody meat carved out of a cow's stomach (with a still-beating heart) and shoved into your gaping mouth before you can even pick your jaw up from the restaurant's floor.

“Race me back. Or play me in cliffwalking or something. You got lucky.”

“You've never beat me before fuck off.”

All he could do at that was smirk and then subsequently notice that “smirk” and “smile” are differentiated by only two letters; and furthermore, that a performatory, slightly flirtatious smirk, with an “-rk,” is like the antidote to a performatory “-le.” When he was in love he was cute.

At this moment, their hearts still pounding, gasping for breath, exhausted, the desert horizon unspooling before them all too like their future, surprisingly and rather depressingly empty, rumors of a sunrise began to begin to percolate at the water cooler in the terrestrial office where the ground and sky work in tandem.

Leo looked at her face and the faint scar on her right cheek which she had kept a mystery. He had practiced this speech for weeks.

“I fucking love you Abigail but it's because of that that I can't be with you if I stay here with you then I will be happy and if I am happy then I can't be a gunslinger because I won't want to spend my days confronting criminals who live in far away lands if I have you and if I can't be a gunslinger than everyone will be disappointed in me and I'm sorry but I can't take their disappointment and you know the people I'm talking about the only people other than you who have ever mattered in my life yes that's why I don't care what anyone else thinks because I am so caught up in their opinions and I know you think that's cool about me and I know that I don't have the courage to say this out loud and I know that you would and I know that that is why you deserve better than me and I know that years down the road when I am depressed as shit I will look back on this day and I will smile nostalgically and whatever other sad sack I am talking to will think I am looking back at a happy day but I won't because this isn't a happy day this is the

greatest day of my life which means it is not a happy day because happiness and greatness are mutually exclusive don't you know that actually I wouldn't be surprised if you figured out a way to make the two coexist but only you could do it Abigail only you I can't do it and I will think to myself you could have gone down this other road but you didn't and that is why you are here and you only have yourself to blame and yes you got me the truth is that I do love you Abigail I love everything about you from that time you threatened to jump off the cliffs if you weren't allowed to wrestle bulls with the boys to that time you finally opened up to me about your younger brother and your open vulnerability inspired me and that was also the moment I knew I could never have you and you are the best thing that ever happened to me and you make me happy like no one else but there are things more important in this world than interpersonal love and the truth is that you are a distraction yes there I said it you are a distraction but don't take that the wrong way that is the highest compliment I can give someone because it means that you actually have the ability to drag me away from whatever fucked up shit I have on my mind but that same fucked up shit is the stuff that makes me different and I can't let you take that away from me even if it would make you and me happy and I know I am being selfish and I hope you understand that don't you it's just like what would everyone do if I turned out just to be like everyone else a phony and a failure and lying to myself about being happy and the truth is that I simply can't do that so please don't be mad at yourself because there's nothing you could have done and I know that's hard to hear but it is the truth or at least a big part of the truth so don't beat yourself up about it I don't care if you are mad at me though I deserve it and I can take it because I am a vessel for everyone's hopes and dreams in this town so I might as well take on your hatred too. So I guess this all boils down to 'it's not you it's me' but I can't help but feel that my rationale behind that statement is a lot more eloquent than most people's because usually that's just a way to let the other party down easy but in my case it's true," thought Leo.

Leo's words, robotically: "I'm going to have to go away soon. I can't live here anymore."

A blank stare, too shocked to show any emotion. "What?"

"It dulls me."

Nothing was said for minutes.

"You can't come with me."

"Why?"

"You blunt me."

“But we’re happy together.”

“I know we were.”

“Fuck you, Leo Vine.”

In that moment, as Abigail choked those words out, through the storm system of sobs which was monsooning her vocal cords, Leo had never loved her more.

It: is driving back to your house after the party when you’ve dropped your last friend off and they’re shambling through the front door, and they probably had a better time than you, for hopefully readily apparent reasons, assuming universal decency (so yeah actually scratch that earlier part) and at least some level of familiarity with frankly superhuman feats of discipline and responsibility, and you’re alone again. Or even maybe at the party, surrounded by heads and bodies and stories which you’ve had to spend years convincing yourself are as compelling as your own and so which you should probably learn but you’re frustratingly incapable of it and you don’t know why because you don’t even shave yet. Or when you’re actually happy, really and truly, and then you successfully torture yourself by reminding yourself that it will end because everything always ends.

Leo left Abigail crying there, under the blankets, weeping freely, loudly, expressively. He had a fist in his own mouth, everything real left unsaid, biting down hard to avoid lashing out, or, actually, in; tears in his eyes which he could never let fall.

He arrived at the stables, at the bottom of the Mesa (linked by stagecoach on a precarious but incredibly scenic - if you’re into barren deserts - path to the top), several hours early to pick up all of the shit from the horses.

Leo woke up that morning in the Gawaji to dark and cold, now only hours away from it. His warped doppelganger appeared with increasingly frightening regularity, like spotless white Priuses in Texas or other signs of the apocalypse; soon, the gunslinger could make out wrinkled lines on his own disorientingly aged face, he was bald when Leo turned around once, in others he was sporting devil horns - the only consistency was that even his reflection stalked alone. This other’s eyes were black and bloodshot, with chapped lips and cheeks beginning to crack from the chill. Leo didn’t fancy seeing his blood, which looked ready to seep out from his jagged

broken face, on the snow again: the red contrasting starkly with the white like a sunburnt beach going vampire's back who had holes in his shirt, of which he was unaware, while at the beach, possibly due to potential influences of the artificial variety, because living forever, as vampires do, is hard work.

But deep down Leo knew where the real danger lay: like an elephant crossing the vastness of the Serengeti to die at the watering hole at which it was born, Leo was inexorably drawn to the abandoned mine - the Gawaji's festering, bulging, rancid heart, with a darkness so thick and massive it seemed to exert its own gravitational pull - which had become the renegade kingdom of the man he was chasing. Or perhaps it was the animal carcasses which had begun popping up left and right as he drew near, akin to Dunkin' Donuts in New England in their ubiquity and their function as warnings of a deeply different civilization which would chew up those who didn't belong and shit them back out into the snow.

Leo, distant now from friendly faces and from the rays of the sun, which he was once fortunate enough to consider "harmful" (those photons! those globules of heat energy which make our whole deal down here possible!), was caught helplessly in its grotesque orbit. A guinea pig running around aimlessly in a laboratory, while some person who falsely exhibited modesty (itself a sort of display of braggadociousness, like, "look at me! I'm so cool I don't even have to say how cool I am!"), probably in a lab coat - but also maybe not, maybe one of those progressive hipster types who chooses to wear street clothes in the laboratory, this act also a potential symptom of the aforementioned undiagnosed superiority complex, like maybe the standards of the laboratory transcend its walls and the world outside is also just something to be interrogated, hypothesized about, observed, and then, after that, you're done, conclusion, zip - and who genuinely believed that human beings are governed by electrical chemical processes that go on in the brain, and nothing else, analyzed its efforts to escape this prison which was all he had ever known.

On Leo's 25th hour in the Gawaji he reached reached the maw of the mine: it suggested a freefall straight into the dankest depths of the underworld. A battered sign lay in the snow to the left of the entrance; though faded almost illegibly by time, Leo could make out a D and an F and a W. The sun was setting again; and what light did manage to stab in through the treetops would soon cut its losses and retreat back to the heavens.

Leo sensed that he was at a pivotal moment in his life; the air was charged with electricity the way it is immediately following a public tragedy; or, hypothetically speaking, when Nikola Tesla's reanimated corpse is fucking Lightning McQueen's exhaust pipe using some new-fangled lube which conveniently conducts electricity remarkably well and also Victor Frankenstein is at the wheel and this tryst is occurring during a thunderstorm at Benjamin Franklin's house. Furthermore he was quite hungry, having not eaten since leaving town yesterday and having walked nineteen miles over a mountain and through a nightmare tangified while recovering from the emotional and physical torment brought on by several hostile encounters with the animal world.

Which is why the smell of cooking meat wafting up from the darkness was so inviting. Relying on primal instinct alone, Leo followed his nose into the hole, stumbling downward through layer after layer of rock, in some weird sort of chute like something for a dumbwaiter, past unseen animal skeletons decomposing in the dirt around him, and crashed face down onto a plush assortment of - could it be? - genuine Kiyan feather beds? The ones in fashion among the handsome and the wealthy on the Mesa?

Leo nearly went blind from the shock. Several bonfires lit up the space, revealed to be an underground dome of sorts, or like an inverted caldera, with the "mine shaft," which was a thin proboscis type protrusion coming down from the ceiling, gradually and carefully guiding anybody who made the plunge down onto the beds.

Instruments, paintings, statues, and bookshelves abounded; it was as if the museums of Paris and London and New York had been looted and dumped in this literal hole in the ground. Little tables, in warm pools of light from the fires, the kind that make you want to cozy up with a mug of hot chocolate and slippers in the winter, were everywhere, each with a beautiful marble chess set on it, and antique phonographs from a time when massive handlebar moustaches - like one might see on a 21st century wanna-be sommelier/mime hybrid Parisian immigrant - were en vogue. Also found were guns: beautiful killing machines made of precious metals, guns of yore which should have been on display proudly at the economically titled - for transporting wood and paint to the Mesa was expensive and inefficient in the olden days - Gun Museum in Picolero, where Leo had spent many an afternoon dreaming as a boy.

The smell, redolent of his mother's cooking, back when he still enjoyed that godawful fucking dogshit, was coming from behind Leo: the gunslinger, weak from exhaustion and near

paralyzed by shock, managed - in a superhuman feat of exertion only made possible by sheer curiosity at this point (namely to understand just exactly what the fuck was going on here) - to crawl to his feet and shamble toward the man tending the fire.

“H-hello?” Leo wheezed out, his vocal cords grown rusty from serial disuse. “Mister? Where am I?”

The man, clothed warmly in bear skins to protect against the cold - which was near unbearable here, where the sun’s rays never dared show - and with a great bushy beard which implied a lineage descending from a gene pool which had spent some time in the Frosties, said nothing. In fact, he gave no impression of having noticed Leo at all, despite the latter’s theatrical entrance. The bearded x-togenarian seemed to stare longingly into the nearby fire - with the same shockingly blue eyes as Leo - as if he had seen a ghost, or perhaps a full procession of them, the souls of the dead marching before his eyes, each and every one of them well-drilled, not daring - or, and this is another beast entirely: not bothering - to stray from the path to their ultimate destination: death.

Leo, his decorum neglected out of a place of compassion and consideration for the UN Charter-violating plight of his stomach - at this moment a nation of a billion voices crying out for their mothers because they wanted to be heard by at least one person before they die for fuck’s sake - forced the issue, stood up, reached out, and tapped the man on the shoulder.

“Look dude give me some fucking food or so help me God I will beat you to death right here right now you don’t even deserve a bullet I don’t care what you’ve got going on down here although it is pretty cool I’ll admit.”

The man reacted to Leo’s touch like someone who has just realized that the car they had passed moments ago extra smoothly - acceleration like a gazelle cross-bred with Usain Bolt, James Bond style - was actually an undercover cop, the blue lights flashing in the rear view mirror: his head snapped away from the fire; his eyes were already welling with tears.

“Oh no. Not you. Not again,” whispered the old man, clearly in great pain, in conversation with someone who had come and gone from this place years ago.

He then turned and left, weaving his way through the works of art and stacks of books the height of most adolescent human females. The old man disappeared into a part of the room untouched by the fires’ warmth and light. Deducing that the man meant no harm and that his lack

of denial constituted acceptance and adhering to the democratic norms which had successfully governed his body so far, Leo gorged himself on the mystery meat roasting on the fire.

Some minutes later, for time seemingly did not apply to this netherworld of lost and neglected masterpieces with a permanent population of one, the old man returned. He carried several notebooks in his hand: each was marked simply: "Debwewin."

"Read, my child. To go through this again, to verbalize my frustration and your suffering ... to open the possibility of considering accepting responsibility... it is too painful." His speech was punctuated by periods of silence and great discomfort; his voice was weathered like a once spotless pebble which had come into the possession of a twister seeker with a penchant for juggling rocks while houses were being uprooted in the background. Time - and some other tragedy - had scarred this man.

None of the books claimed an author, but their handwritings were distinct. The first, with a handwriting brash and swashbuckling: "I feel I have something to offer. The Frosties remain unexplored and therefore unconquered: an opportunity to be somebody. The old fools in Bendrikin are wrong about their exploded gold mine: they're still sitting on one, but the gold is high adventure and freedom galore. I shall make these mountains my kingdom. I hope to face that villain out there in all that dark and all that cold and bring him back to Bendrikin to hang!"

The second, this one smaller and more timid as a rule but with the occasional impulse of grandiosity, like if Chris Nolan directed a generic beer commercial: "This fucker's crazy. Fucking nuts. I don't care about the bodies, maybe the guy was having a bad day. But to do this? To live out here in the Gawaji? In all that dark and all that cold? Shit, man. I just want to capture this bastard and get out of here. The exploring life isn't for me, it turns out: everywhere you go, there is only one companion: death. Signs of it are everywhere. Killing food to survive, vultures on the way into town, maggots on those bodies... *shiver* I've seen so many beautiful things: a lake so clear one can see whispers of the ruins of Gyallico at its bottom, winter foxes trotting through the snow in unwitting mimicry of the Potter's Day parade, the peaks of mountains and castles of clouds competing for primacy over the horizon (with eagles occasionally pitching in their lot with one side or the other) - but no one to share it with. Oh well, at least upon my return I will have sad eyes."

A third, written by a shaking hand and its pages graced by tears: "So this is it. All of that for this. Those bodies my predecessors. My guns remain quiet, bullets unspent - only one

needed, now, anyway. I've reached the heart of the Gawaji. The end of the world of reason and of life as we know it.

A cruel joke, in the end. Dreams dashed. Lies exposed. It's all fucking distractions from the truth: that there are two things certain in this life: I am alone and I am dying. You are alone and you are dying. That creepy ass old man: he is alone and he is dying, too.

We are as leaves falling from a tree: for a brief time the winds of fate may align and we may travel in step with others; but nature is a capricious whore and gravity overwhelms even the most resilient updrafts.

I arrived in Bendrikin eager to become a full-fledged gunslinger. I would be the first from the Wheat Sea in three generations. My heroes, the gunslingers of yesteryear who tamed the wilderness and spread Law throughout the Jurisdiction - I had a seat reserved at the table.

I now wonder about their stories. They must have some answer. Too bad they all threw themselves off of the Mesa before turning thirty.

And so now I sit here. Waiting to die. Which I guess doesn't change anything real anyways - only my knowledge of it."

When Leo finished reading he looked around and saw his surroundings, and where he was in the universe, for the first time. Everything clicked into place for the young gunslinger, always too sure of himself to stop for a second and consider alternative possibilities. Those bodies in Bendrikin: former residents of this infernal pit and the authors of these journals. Suicides which this man before him must dumped back in town in the hope of warding off future daring gunslingers ready to become self-styled masters of the universe. All of this art: creations of indescribable skill made out of sheer boredom stemming from denial of the truth: that you are alone and you are dying. The crime scene in Bendrikin wasn't an irrational act of inhumanity; it was a result of forcing an HD mirror uncomfortably close to one's self, analyzing the reflection in the sober light which only absolute darkness (and the metallic glow of a beer-blurred 2 am TV screen, but that doesn't apply here) can provide, and proceeding accordingly.

If, as these journals proposed, death is inevitable, and aloneness is the rule - albeit sporadically interspersed by periods of togetherness, but those will inevitably unravel - then why would one not spin that cosmic roulette wheel and see what the other side has to offer? You're only missing existential dread, after all.

Like the dead he had set out to avenge, Leo Vine no longer gave a shit about being a great gunslinger. Having come face to face with the truth, he could think of nothing else. And any desire to spread this truth was homicidal in nature: he would be doing the rest of the world a favor by killing them all and sparing them from this knowledge.

“I want out. Take me back up,” Leo heard himself say, a calm demeanor and steely voice masking the inner turmoil raging inside - a boiling pot of soup bubbling over in a rat-infested Parisian restaurant on Bastille Day.

The old man looked Leo square in the eye. He saw the rage there, the anger at the universe for having been tricked so thoroughly and so brutally - and being able to commune only with the dead about it. The old man saw reflected in Leo’s eyes Bendrikin burning, the snow for once unable to put out a fire, the bullets which long ago claimed that they sang of justice now ditching the charade and singing only of the truth: that you were alone and dying but now you’re just dead. You’re welcome.

The old man saw these things and he shuffled back to his corner of darkness, this time reemerging with a grappling gun - the invention of some previous gunslinger and the only one who had ever returned back the world topside still breathing; it was typically only brought out when too many gunslingers had killed themselves and the bodies started to smell and the old man tied them all up, shot them out of the mine shaft, and started the trek back to Bendrikin to dump them there - which he then handed to Leo.

Leo took one last glance around this lost shrine of logic and artistic genius: a location so remote and so exotic (being a good distance past Bendrikin which itself was already so deep in the middle of nowhere), that it was actually just so deep in “of,” if that makes any sense. He flew back into the tube, up out of the darkness and back into the Gawaji, but he felt no wind rushing past his face as he rocketed upward through the stale air.

The sun had set behind the Frosties and the Gawaji was as menacing and mysterious as ever. But Leo now recognized the darkness as an old friend, a souvenir he would bring back from his odyssey to figure out why someone would do such a thing. Yes, Leo Vine discovered the truth out there; outside of your window, probably a pretty good distance to the west, depending on your present location, through a saloon’s portal door and then hundreds of miles north; out there in all that dark and all that cold.

That night Leo slept comfortably - more restfully than he had in years, in fact, now that he was at peace with the universe and he had figured out why that thing had happened - in the snow, in the Gawaji, and remembered.

The kitchen in their house at Picolero was empty when Leo got home from training that evening - today more practice on the wonderfully mind numbing art of cartography. Through the stained glass window, which made an ornate, statuesque, almost regal personage out of a cactus, the setting sun bathed the room in a murky aqua-green light, as if their house were underwater, buried and suffocating beneath thousands of pounds of water pressure, where sharks, sensing your blood from miles away, could creep up on you in the darkness. Upstairs, Leo could hear his parents bickering about something which he couldn't make out explicitly, but was probably about him, given he was the only topic of conversation like ever.

As Leo kicked his boots off and tossed his holster on the leather couch with a carefully practiced, designed to look careless elegance, they came downstairs. They looked as though nothing was wrong. It was easier that way, and had been for some time. Forced smiles were painted on their handsome faces, which likely would've gone unnoticed by the general populace given the plague of unfamiliarity and too quick glances which affects this human race.

"You forgot the bread again, Leo."

Leo's resolve faltered briefly before recovering even more quickly, as if nothing had happened; his expression remained impassive and aloof; he managed to nod a nonverbal acknowledgement. His father came and stood over him, eyes full of hurt: wanting to offer comfort and reassurances but not able to find the means of doing so; a frustrated man trying to joke around and laugh with his son, but a son who wanted nothing more than to be left alone by everyone so that he could do what he needed to do, which was something so nebulous and immaterial that he could never really explain it to anyone - including himself - in the first place.

"I saw Abigail today. She was down at the stables, getting a horse ready for what looked like a long ride. I hope that horse was strong, because she sure packed a lot of stuff on it, and you know how she likes to ride those things into the ground!"

"You didn't say anything to her did you?"

"No."

An awkward silence reigned momentarily - the kind common between two introverts on a first date when the restaurant's radio is in between songs and you've already discussed the weather and the government (so in other words very abnormal for a conversation between father and son) - with no one quite sure what to make of this opening salvo, before Leo dethroned it.

"So do you want me to go get the food or not?"

"Oh, no, that's OK. We have stuff here."

"I really don't mind. It's not like I have anything else to do. Deputy Plant gave me tonight and tomorrow morning off."

"That was kind of him."

A beat.

"Feel free to go out after dinner then."

"OK I'll think about it."

Leo left the couch and walked upstairs to his room, where the lower level's submarine quality was replaced by a crimson hellscape of unfiltered blood-orange solar annihilation. His room - with the same poster of those huge trees from the forest outside of Kiyo standing guard over his bed, that one which they had got for him when they went when he was a baby and had hung there ever since - was burning, like figuratively speaking. He could hear them talking again downstairs. He stuck his head under his pillow, as scratchy and hot to the touch and as sweat-inducing as ever, in order to not hear them, taking shelter in that last unassailable bunker which can be made more secure than any underground concrete marvel of engineering or a 10 man behind the ball defence from an Allardyce-managed relegation candidate when all you need is a goal to wrap up the 3 points: that space between the pillow and the mattress, where all noise can be tuned out and the subconscious is allowed to run wild and free if executed properly. But he couldn't take much more of it.

The tiptoeing on eggshells; that is, trouble in paradise. He was a fucking gunslinger. Gunslingers don't get sad because their life is so brilliant and exciting and if they do get sad then they use it as fuel to go be a better gunslinger not to cry in bed late at night because you made a lot of mistakes you made a lot of mistakes you made a lot of mistakes you made a lot of mistakes but you're too proud to admit them. The drawings he had been working on recently, of all of the places he would (not) go, looked to Leo like a bunch of kindling, not the closeted masterpieces of a young man afraid to show the world how he saw it - even if the view was truly divine.

Suddenly, disastrously, like a power outage at a cinema, Leo was leaping down the staircase, a caged bird freed.

“Do you know why I’m fucking here right now and not out there with everyone else? Because of you! Stop fucking judging me all the time!”

Bated breath released; they knew this had been coming.

“Calm down you’re being silly.”

“I fucking estranged myself from Abigail because I told myself that she was a distraction from my fucking purpose! Like what the fuck does that even mean! I cried myself to sleep every night for almost a year and told myself that it was all so I could be great and so that I could make you guys happy! Because greatness and happiness can’t coexist, right? Right? Do you have any idea what it’s like to have to ride a hundred miles so you can stick your head underwater, for real, to scream bloody murder and let it all out? So you can go somewhere where nobody knows your name? WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH ME?”

“Breathe. Stop crying. Breathe. This isn’t becoming.”

“Stop being a prima donna.”

“Now, man the fuck up and don’t be a pussy.”

“Complaining isn’t going to make anything better. Everyone goes through what you’re going through. Suffering doesn’t make you special. It makes you a fucking human being.”

The underwater atmosphere from earlier seemed almost prophetic, as a decade’s worth of tears, public ones that is, poured out of Leo. His parents left him collapsed there on the imported bearskin rug, shaking uncontrollably, sobbing like a piece of shit so miniscule, so insignificant, that it wasn’t even worth flushing, much like he had left Abigail bawling a few years ago on the roof of the library looking out over their could-be-would-be-should-be desert kingdom.

That night, after his parents were asleep - they slept quite peacefully with little to no regard for the blowup mere hours before which was one of the most seminal moments in their son’s life - Leo shot out his woes, out there in the desert, birds dropping out of the sky like leaves in the fall, as if some eldritch being - who had been given a vocabulary exercise at the Academy of Eldritch Beings to demonstrate, in practice, the meaning of the word “capricious” - had cranked the gravity up to 11.

The following morning, after a night of great clarity and remembrance of things past, at the same time approximately as that daily event when the sun returned briefly to remind the world that natural light existed like one of those annoyingly endless and endlessly annoying infomercial salesmen who show up like clockwork when whatever sorry daytime network TV program being shown is finally getting tolerable - but wait, there's more! - Leo stormed out of the Gawaji, an angel of death ready to let the good people of Bendrikin know what he had learned about the departed. When approached from the north, coming down from the foothills leading up to the Gawaji, the wooden buildings of Bendrikin resemble a child's playset, insignificant and flimsy against the vast expanse of desolate tundra it affronts. Leo was feeling playful in a fucked up sadistic manner: a stereotype-affirming-chooses-to-be-bald disaffected young man with an affinity for mid-20th century central European fascist states looking at a LEGO menorah distorted through an ornate beer stein which was worryingly empty from the menorah's perspective.

The Frosties, which once seemed so alluring and exciting, had revealed themselves to be an inhospitable wasteland populated by no living thing. Indeed, nothing was the same: the color had gone out of the world; Leo's artist's eye ignored the eagles pinwheeling in the sky like two sitcom will-they-won't-they lovers; the snow which once amplified the sun's light and made the day more luminous than the lightbulb section of Home Depot now strictly absorbed and digested that light and gave back only darkness. An omerta agreement between the millions of snowflakes: we must let nothing escape. All of the dreams of being a gunslinger replaced by one singular fact, colder than any winter night Bendrikin had ever known: Leo Vine is alone, and Leo Vine is dying.

When Leo arrived in Bendrikin for the second time the townspeople were watching him scrutinizingly, analyzing his gait and his rugged appearance, passing judgment on him - Leo, the boy trusted to do the job of ten men and track down a believed psychopathic murderer through ice and darkness - from the comfort and the company of their own homes, surrounded by people who they told themselves they loved (and only in the most wholesome and most successful cases) in order to keep existing.

Outside of the saloon - now displayed prominently for all to see right on Primary Thoroughfare - stood the tree from Leo's window: it had been uprooted and decorated garishly

with inorganic and repugnant ornaments to celebrate Potter's Day, when Sheriff Mikel Bob first established Law on the Mesa. This tree - a maverick, a rebel more resourceful than any of its brothers and sisters who lurked clumped together in the shadow of the Gawaji - had been exploited; its courage was too taunting and too rude for it to exist; it now stood domesticated and drooping, like one of those sad dogs you see in the park which is wearing little doggy boots and an ugly sweater that would make the other dogs cringe, if they can indeed read, maybe it says "my mommy is PAWesome," or something like that, and then you're asking yourself if those writers had considered the homophonic complications of that statement and if maybe dogs have us all tricked, and you have to pretend to think that those artificial curls that this poor misguided soul with whom you are speaking thought looked cute are cute when really you just want to shoot the leash and let the dog run free into the great wide open.

Leo's mind was burning despite the temperature outside. A million outcomes raced through his mind: in some he did Bendrikin a favor, razing the town and then riding on to do the same farther south, a lifetime spent spreading this truest, most sacred of gospels; in others he simply took his father's gun and shot himself in the head - the "selfish" route - with only a permanent grin of utter bliss as explanation, with the possibility that he might be able to give a more thorough rationale in the afterlife, depending on what that experience looked like; in a third he stalked silently through town and would keep on walking, forever an island, entirely to himself, alone in space and time. The truth, however, would be inescapable, no matter how far or wide he ran; he was saddled with the gunslinger's burden.

Leo burst into the Diamond Factory and the dust bunnies scattered. His mind drifted to his right hip, where lay the power over life and death. The tree seemed to stare at him on his way in, its bark blurred by the ornaments it wept for others' enjoyment. A kindred spirit. The pickaxe of gold regarded the young gunslinger mistrustingly, as if it knew Leo was weighing the lives of an entire town in his mind. Leo certainly could not return to Picolero and pretend to be the happy contented boy he was before, that was for sure.

Nobody's lingering eyes dared follow him into the Diamond Factory, the townspeople too scared of something they couldn't explicitly define to encounter this mercurial and likely highly dangerous man who was the first person to enter and return still living from the Gawaji in decades. Reasonable people, rational thinkers - those so hopelessly lost that they didn't even realize they were in the most dastardly labyrinth ever concocted by whatever force you believe

governs the universe - let the gunslinger go about his ways while they remained at a safe distance, ready to reap the rewards of his work.

Inside the Diamond Factory, Leo was asking questions: such as: could he suffer more? And were there others who walked around with this knowledge weighing on their hearts and on their minds? And could his suffering be used for some other purpose, something which he might be able to convince himself - again, with precisely the right amount of thought required, like a decimal point or two off and the whole thing goes kaput - actually ennoble and gives a purpose to his sorrow and his pain? Was - is this what being a gunslinger was all about? One entrusted by society to confront the elements at the outskirts of town, the nomadic drifters who made things go bump in the night - that is, until those outsiders were raping your wife and murdering your children while you were tied down helplessly to the side, eyes peeled back forcefully, one percent of your brain considering the banana's situation holistically for the first time in your existence, the other ninety nine screaming in pain and in terror as the winds shift and your world collapses, and also wondering, for the first time, in their last moments, how the hell they had shared an organ with those hippie motherfuckers who were more interested in bananas than in their own preservation for all those years - and then receiving nothing but blank stares and calls to do more, always more, in return? Someone who had to live with that horrible soul-crushing truth - I am alone and I am dying - without the relief of sharing that pain with someone else? Someone waging a never-ending battle against demons - both in the world and in the mind - with no real possibility of victory or respite, only delaying the inevitable long enough for someone to take note of your struggle (but never really bother to understand it because that would require too much effort and too much thinking) and then offer a hollow and obligatory "good job kid, on to the next one!" when pressed?

The answer to these questions, based on life, seemed to be yes. Which led to another question: what to do about it? Once again, Leo considered Bendrikin aflame, souls set free from their daily toil and spared from this infernal epiphany. He envisioned himself lying dead in the snow like those who had come before him and who had greeted him upon his first entry into the town. Finally, he imagined himself existing as a shield between Bendrikin and the Gawaji, preventing anyone from ever following in his footsteps, but also realizing that there existed a Gawaji for every Bendrikin and that he couldn't cover the entire Jurisdiction all on his lonesome; he might be able to save anyone from ever reaching this conclusion in his neck of the woods but

the world was a big place and there were aspiring gunslingers everywhere. Of course he was no longer motivated by external validation because he realized how temporary it all was: he had survived the mountain lion encounter unscathed just to lose dangerous amounts of blood to a fucking leech attack of all things. An open dialogue with the people of Bendrikin wasn't really an option either because they would refuse to consider the words he was saying - far too radical; or, for the luckier ones, they just wouldn't have the means of processing it. The thing that made the decision so difficult was that nothing really changed in any of the outcomes (Leo did not view the death of an entire town as particularly pertinent at this time). He supposed that he could leave it up to chance - yes, that appeared to be the most fair course of action. But who the fuck ever cared about stuff being fair?

So he returned to Primary Thoroughfare, where the people resumed spying on his every action, so attracted and irrationally invested in the figure under the spotlight on Leo's stage that they neglected their own story out of an abundance of willful ignorance.

"Come out," he called to everyone and to no one in particular, speaking like a man just come out of a trance, in a hypnotically shamanic melody, knowing that everyone was hanging on his every word, a bunch of strung-up junkies enthralled by some televangelist preacher with greasy hair and rabbit eyes, and whom they would totally consider to be positively unrighteous if they had the presence of mind and independence of thought to take such definitive stances. "I found your man in the Gawaji. He will no longer trouble you. I ask that you send no one after me into that place. It is not for you."

The Blooms began to clamor amongst themselves: this wasn't how it was supposed to go! The villain either returns like a cancer to finish the job he started, or the hero before them has the villain's head in his backpack - wrapped and sanitized, of course, ready for public consumption. Not this ambiguity, this anticlimax - not a dripping faucet, Bendrikin wanted a roaring waterfall! The masses wanted blood!

Leo silenced them with a series of gunshots, bullets sent arching through the sky, through the snow - but always at a slight angle so that they wouldn't come down and nest a few inches into their brain tissue. "I also want to say one more thing before I leave. I have a question for you."

The townspeople turned as one and regarded him as one does a circus freak, no longer entranced by his beauty, terrified of his wild-eyed appearance and loose trigger fingers. “Go ahead,” they stammered.

“OK. So. Do you want me to kill all of you every last man woman and child right now or do you want to wait it out for a few more years? I can probably hold them off for a little bit longer but eventually they will overwhelm me. I could also just kill myself right here in front of you and then you would get to keep living your sorry lives for as long as you wanted. In that case I am going to write a note that you can show to whatever Deputies they send from Picolero to figure out why I am dead so that they won’t summarily execute all of you.”

The stunned crowd struggled to respond. Some of them started to whimper, others turned clumsily in the snowdrifts and started barricading their doors in a doomed effort to stop a Picoleran gunslinger from harming them. “P-please don’t kill us. Just go away and leave us be.”

“Are you sure? I really don’t mind. It won’t weigh on my conscience at all because I would actually be doing you a favor. I can’t explain it right now but it’s true just trust me I need you to trust me.”

“Yes we are sure. Look Sir I don’t know what the freak you are talking about but we want you to leave. We don’t really care about those bodies anymore. We just don’t want to die and you are threatening to kill all of us.”

“OK so first off I’m not threatening to kill you. You have clearly stated that that is not what you want and I respect that. I disagree with your decision to keep living but honestly I don’t have the energy to explain it to all of you right now. So I guess yeah just go away and don’t worry about me.”

The townspeople started backing away slowly, as if Primary Thoroughfare had been seasoned haphazardly with land mines that could be detonated at one wrong step, always keeping their eyes locked on the gunslinger’s hands - they knew that if he felt so inclined he could easily have them all dead before you could say Primary Thoroughfare (which, as aforementioned, is a mouthful).

While the others were busy fearing for their lives, Leo retrieved his trusty journal from his sack and started writing a letter explaining his decision. His voice rang out, “Hey, hang on, you are going to need this! I’m going to put it under that tree whose soul you destroyed when

I'm done. Remember this is so people from my home will know that I killed myself and none of you are to blame."

He spent several hours compiling this account of the last days and occasional nostalgic ramblings of Leo Vine, the promising young gunslinger from Picolero. After he finished writing he shot himself in the head and it is said by many that he died almost instantaneously of blood loss. But if you want my opinion - with the caveat that I am a. not an MD and b. a hopeless romantic - I would say that he overdosed on the truth.