







**COSMO**  
**SPENCER GORDON**

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While some of the characters in these stories take their names from real-life personages, their personalities and behaviour should be read as entirely fictional – they bear no resemblance to the persons whose names they share. Everything in this collection is a product of the imagination of the author.

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## JOURNEY TO THE CENTRE OF SOMETHING

### I

McConaughey loved the Painted Desert for its emptiness, its flat inhospitality. He loved it for its tiny unthinking lizard brain, buried miles beneath the buttes, dreaming its quiet dreams like some sleeping, insane god. How the chalky browns and whites could explode into lavenders and coppers, glorious pinks and yellows, spilling into canyons and valleys that would never feel the tread of a boot. The heavenly shadows of mesas, the secret, life-saving nectar of cacti. As a kid he loved stories of criminals tied to anthills, of horses keeled over from thirst, of terrible yawning jaws of human and mammal and monster skulls half-buried in the shifting sands. It was the tarry smell of it, the whipping gales, the grit of rock in his mouth; how suddenly the wind could rise to freeze his blood as the sun dropped low and gory, ripping out his guts with its beauty. How easily a rattler could nip his heel and stop his heart. To boil it down: it didn't care about him. The buzzards hanging perfect and still in the painful blue sky, waiting to eat and digest and shit him down onto lonely, passing traffic. This was a place for rocks, not people. It hated his paper skin. It hated his gentleness.

Yet here he was, Matthew McConaughey, squinting over the dash of his beloved van behind tortoiseshell shades as the light seared through the glass and stuck his naked, sweaty flesh to the leather seat. McConaughey drove naked in the desert, always had – he felt entirely alone, and so why

not feel the heat on every inch of his body, the raw lash of the passing wind against his temple and cheek and pubic hair as he cranked down the windows and cooked. On this summer day in the twenty-eighth year of his life, McConaughey headed south, ostensibly lost, though he knew if he unfolded the wrinkled state map at his feet he would find his way home. Soon the Petrified Forest Road would recede to a mote on the horizon, and he'd turn onto Highway 180, having then the choice of right or left, east or west – of more flat, open road or a town, a beer, a bed – the romance of solitude and small places, the blurring of identity. Before nightfall, he'd be close to Silver Creek. Tomorrow he'd reach Mexico, if he gunned it, and so he did, fine to be lost and alone in the *big empty*, curling his toes over the sooty gas pedal and kicking the map away.

The van, like all his vehicles and animals, had a name: *Cosmo*. It was his personal chariot through good times and dangerous places – hell, the whole cosmos, if his head was screwed on right. It was his key to adventure, immaturity, boyish exploration, and he loved its white base coat and slick blue stripe, its dependable, beat-up attitude (not the kind of thing you'd expect from the star of *A Time to Kill*, let alone *Amistad*). He liked to think he could count on *Cosmo's* curving, faux-wood walls, the soft bed for napping behind him, the captain's chair to his back draped with stained flags (of the Lone Star State and the U.S.A., overlapped), the bead curtain separating forward from rear decks, the blue carpet beneath his sandy toes and the glittering disco ball rocking on its ceiling screws. Today, he kept the television quiet, but blared his Amboy Dukes CD – Ted Nugent's motorcycle guitars on 'Journey to the Center of the Mind' revving from six speakers, subwoofers, flowing up through his butt to hammer its way through his trembling hands.

Native American carvings and tokens – Navajo, Ojibwa, Aztec – dangled from short lengths of dental floss attached to the roof. A small brown Smoking Indian, just for the kitsch, rotated endlessly from his rear-view mirror. They were his talismans, wards against losing his path, against the demons that crowded lost roads and wayward travellers. Little pieces of the land held aloft to reassure the sleeping lizard god beneath his wheels that he came in peace, that he had prepared his offer-



ing. The ground begged for water, and in a place of such heat, human moisture was the most holy, precious gift. Clutching his penis one-handed, he aimed his stream of urine into a red plastic funnel attached to a tube leading beneath the van, sprinkling his piss along the asphalt in tiny droplets.

‘You’re welcome,’ he said breathily to the road, to no one, swigging from his bottle of mineral water and shaking his dick dry.

Beside the Smoking Indian, attached to his rear-view mirror by plastic clip, hung his reliable tape recorder, recently loaded with two double-A batteries and an unused cassette. He turned down the Dukes and made another entry in his road diary.

‘Time: 3:04 p.m. Making for the 180. And then, well, the sky being the limit, we don’t know ... This *is* a voyage, all right ... And something ... *something is definitely* going to happen. But don’t get impatient, now. Let that *something* come to you.’

He pressed STOP. Maybe that last entry was unnecessary. Just a sigh to fill the silence. So far he’d done no profound thinking, but he knew if he kept driving the thoughts would come. The muses would start speaking to him, come whispering in under the radio and dash as he let the blankness purge all mind-fucking trauma. Muses, spirits, whatever – he needed the blankness to clean out his brain, give him the cherished white page upon which he’d record some mental masterpiece, some dexterous feat of thinking to save him from his city-based, head-clutter funk. He’d done some of his best acting alone, just Matthew vs. the recorder, working out his shit, practising his accents and tricks at delivery. Indeed, he’d recorded his greatest insight on the same device: a bit of wisdom that came to him last year on a nighttime highway in northern Texas, where he realized that true acting involved the *head*, not the *heart*. Only the head could get sucked in. A mature heart would stay put, no matter what sacrifices were made, so it made no difference how deeply you delved into a persona or how methody you got pursuing a role. If you knew this, you could allow yourself to get reckless, to lose for longer periods whatever you thought was some essential *you*. He had no fear, now, about going the extra mile, or going to those dark places certain roles required. Spielberg taught him some of that. So did Joel Schumacher,

and the Buddha, and his father, and Val Kilmer, but it was mostly a Matthew original, thought up while doing his roadwork, confessing for his recorder.

Here's a real confession, he thought. He hit REC.

'I don't want the day to end. I'm happy to be here.'

He let the wheels spin on the tape, recording dead air, the distant sounds of the highway and the weird whispers in the rushing wind. *Happy to be here*, he thought. *Why?* Because every city, cellphone and email meant a miniature catastrophe. Every convenience store, grocery store, pharmacy, doctor's office in every town across the country: a tabloid shot of him and Sandra, neither of them smiling, at some early-evening L.A. premiere. He couldn't remember the day or occasion, what the goddamned weather'd been like (though it was always sunny, he recalled: that one constant hurt). What could he do now but run, burrow, hide? He was tired, felt sick to death of heartache. The desert meant total erasure; it meant a fade-out to a new scene.

'Something's got to happen,' he whispered, though not entirely sure how that something would turn out. There were two irksome worms troubling his conscience: one romance-related, the other a matter of career. He'd broken out of his Dave Wooderson, *Dazed and Confused* obscurity with the John Grisham project *A Time to Kill*, feeling that the time was finally right, that his moon had lined up with some ascendant star. The re-release of *The Return of the Texas Chainsaw Massacre* merely amused him, now that he was famous; let all the mainstream filmgoers puzzle over his hammed-up role in the straight-to-video, schlocky gore flick. It amused him in the same way Cosmo could put people off, remind them he was wise to the head game of Hollywood, that he didn't exactly *want* to fit in. And then he'd scored his next big shot, one of the surefire films of the decade: *Amistad*, historical tear-jerker, December release, with Hopkins overacting as John Quincy Adams and Spielberg almost frighteningly confident at the helm. It was like winning the lottery. How could he fuck up a film with such star power, about something as unanimously cherished as abolition? Got to play another smart-sounding lawyer, too: James Baldwin, southern gentleman and estate attorney, much like in his lucky break as the southern-born defence attorney Jake

Brigance in *A Time*. All the right conditions, and he thought he'd kicked it straight through the posts: Oscars and Golden Globes, whispers of promise in the flashbulb air. Especially after his earlier summer exposure in the high-grossing *Contact*, which had him billed second to Jodie Foster and generally commended for his laid-back, soft-toned approach to playing a holy man. But what was the miserable, memorized consensus? Ebert put it plainly: he was 'not much moved' by his performance. *TV Guide* thought his accent 'unidentifiable,' his mannerisms a 'liability,' said he was still too much the 'dude from Texas.' The *San Francisco Chronicle* called his passionate exclamations 'broad gesturing,' his overall portrayal 'close to embarrassing.' There were some good reviews, sure, and thank the sleeping gods, but the split decision was pummelling, tripping him up with a hollow sort of fatigue: a hurt that kept on like a gnawing, persistent hangover, reminding him that lightning, as the saying went, only strikes once.

Then it all collapsed with Sandra: a pain that compounded the disappointments of those divided reviews. Everyone could see the honest gut-check chemistry between them. They 'sizzled' onscreen, wrote the journalists; the Deep South sexuality was like thick grease between them, coating them, slick and irresistible. They seemed powerless, innocent of design, as all the mags and TV spots started the rumours before they were even true: that Sandra and Matthew were an on-set couple, an affair in the making. He saw her as a geeky girl who couldn't care less about how she was perceived. He dug her, dug the five years she had on him, dug the way her laugh turned to a honk, dug her heavy-lidded gaze. They could play together; they could high-five, wrestle, burp. He knew she dug him back, but maybe it was all the pressure, the articles and the gossip sheets and the surreptitious snapshots, all that public certainty, that sealed the deal. Maybe. Maybe, in some other, kinder universe, it would have been better to meet away from the camera's imperious eye, to find their own pace, let things fall more naturally. In any case, it happened: they touched in trailers, they made love, they were out in public, and that was that. She'd been a rock throughout that whole crazy year, the New York and L.A. premieres of *Contact* and *Amistad*, the hoping and praying, the long periods of weariness and moping

after the mixed reviews. She'd been the first ear for his fears, a *golden* ear, willing and giving and so patient it made him cry, coaxing thin rivers of tears from his eyes while he toked from his three-foot bong on Cosmo's rear bumper.

Her eyes were wet with crying, too, on the night it finally fizzled – fat, salty tears that he would kiss away, and that one-in-a-million wisdom he'd never find again. He was sweating buckets, not from the night (which was breezy and cool) but from the dread of what was coming. They pressed their foreheads together, fogging up the windows with their heat, saying they loved each other but it *just wasn't right* – that it wasn't being *in* love. And it was exactly what he'd been yearning to say, knowing through the heavy spring rains of '98 that it was doomed, drawing them toward this quiet confrontation. The urge to see her had shrivelled during their extended time apart, they were talking less and less, and soon he'd begun to believe that their love wouldn't have happened if not for the media's meddling, the public's demand for the beautiful picture of their pairing, which seemed so right. He felt a relief in voicing it, and they spoke in soothing tones, crying a little over what could have been and for the time they'd had, which he knew would stay like a damp, bittersweet chill in his bones. They kissed, slow and on the lips, the salt of her sweat beading there against his tongue. And then she slid the door open and left the van, gave a last small squeeze to his hand, called him *Matty*. He slept in Cosmo's stale sheets until just before dawn, waking to a headache, to a clutching paranoia and regret: that even if there was no more thrill, no real connective tissue, no *reason*, there was still the past, and the fanatical force propelling him to hold her and envision some impossible golden future together, denying and delaying all the fine-cutting loneliness that was waiting high above, like a hovering buzzard, falling feather-like to rest and claw at his stomach.

But that was all gone. That sun had set, and here he was. Alone. Healing.

'Happy to be here,' he said again, before stopping the tape.

He reached an intersection. A line of automobiles had stretched behind him; he realized he'd been doing ten or twenty under the limit. Dwelling on all that baggage. Journeying to the centre of something.

Sporadic cars and trucks thundered by on the 180, most heading northwest. McConaughey waited for an opening and merged, throwing Cosmo onto the road and following the main flow of traffic, instantly disappointed that he'd taken the more popular route. He wasn't *about* the popular route; he wasn't *about* going slow. He was all about trailblazing, speeding along the road less travelled. He'd turn off on the first desolate stretch that presented itself, he decided, as long as it meant plowing south, toward the heat and naked expanse that sat between him and the vigilant border: a place that would reward his loneliness, and in its absence both absorb and forgive. He drained the last drops of his water and threw the plastic bottle over his shoulder, where it came to rest amid the camp and detritus of his life.

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*Boy, you done it now*, McConaughey thought. *Got yourself good and lost*. He stuck his neck out the window and sent a long Texan *whoop!* toward the dry horizon.

He couldn't explain the sense of elation he'd been feeling since he yanked the wheel left, splitting to the south and roaring down a nameless road. The Dukes were cooking and jamming up some toe-tapping, extended psychedelia, Nugent labouring a pentatonic riff into ecstasy. McConaughey slammed Cosmo's roof with his palm, another squeal of pleasure leaving his lips as the riff collapsed back into a bass-heavy, pickup rhythm. This was what he'd been waiting for: no destination in sight, no crowding presence, no phone, no email, no connection to anything but the groove of the music and the awful skyline.

There was a passage he'd read somewhere, a long time ago, that came rushing back to mind. Something about the difference between a *pilgrim* and a *tourist*. Could have been from way back in high school, maybe, or while researching a part (or was it an Aerosmith lyric?). Basically, it said that a tourist's travels were mostly physical in nature, that the roving tourist was seeing, experiencing, absorbing, but always as an outsider with home in mind. The itinerary was set in advance, and

the journey gained momentum as a return, rather than a departure. McConaughey was terrified of being the tourist, fanny-packed and Tilley-hatted, visiting the brochure attractions and never once stepping outside the comfortable routes predetermined by tradition or by some expensive agency. No, when he travelled he was pure pilgrim, embarking upon a quest more spiritual than fleshy, where each step along the road was just as important as the last and no firm destination materialized to kill a sense of spontaneity. The road was metaphorical, he thought – a process of becoming rather than visiting.

He had a breakthrough. He thumbed his recorder.

‘Okay. Here we go. The pilgrim travels along a spiritual path; to him the journey requires that he *become* a different dude by the end. On the other hand, the tourist walks a purely physical road, picking up bits and pieces of other cultures and peoples ... but keeping his mind set on home, on a version of himself that won’t change ... And this ... this is *exactly* like acting. An actor plays all these parts, but keeps his heart safe and sound, just like a tourist remembering his home. Being on a pilgrimage is dangerous, but acting ... acting is easy ... acting’s about the *head* ... and real change requires ... the *heart*.’

Hitting STOP, he felt a clarity of mind he hadn’t had for months. It was rare that a trip like this would pan out exactly as he envisioned it. He imagined the stack of tapes he’d fill with philosophy before the end. He tapped his fingers at ten and two, jiggling his thighs in time with the music, letting his thoughts levitate into orbit as miles began to thread out behind him and the rocky sediment to his left began turning to a chalky, bone-like white, swirling higher now in elevation like an inverted crater, and along the empty field were scattered bleak and purposeless stones, ragged hardness, this tanned and prostrate body –

*What?*

Matthew whipped his head to the left and brought his foot down hard on the brakes. His tires squealed to a dusty stop on the right shoulder. *No way.* He looked again, and there it was, his eyes refusing to play tricks. *Aw, shit,* he thought, fumbling for his sunglasses. There, about thirty feet from the road: a body, *somebody*, a human being, lying on his chest in the dirt, a tanned, bare ass mooning him, the buzzards, the empty sky.

‘No way, no way,’ he said aloud, more excited than scared. He was about to immediately rush onto the road to help the poor bastard, but then remembered his nudity. He pulled on a pair of board shorts crumpled under a pile of occult books and magazines. Wiping the sweat from his eyes and raking a few errant locks from his forehead, he slipped into a pair of flip-flops and unlatched Cosmo’s back door, the sunlight making him dizzy.

He still wasn’t convinced, even though he’d gotten a solid look from behind the wheel. You just didn’t find a naked body out in the middle of nowhere, thirty feet from a nameless desert road. Or . . . or *did* you? Still, it was probably a rock, or an animal, a trick of that intense and ancient star beating down from the radioactive sky. Nugent and the Dukes chugged along a minor-chord progression while Matthew flip-flopped across the road, slowing his pace as he approached the heap in the sand.

He dropped to a crouch, hands clasped in the shape of a prayer over his lips. Yep, no mistaking it from this close. It was a body. Naked. And by the looks of it, recently deposited, as there were no signs of decomposition, dehydration or the telltale rips of scavengers. *What in the name of high holy fuck*, he thought, staring at the man’s muscular back, his well-toned calves, his sun-kissed skin, as a drift of dust sprayed over the form.

He squinted north, feeling a hot point of heat fingering the back of his skull. No signs of life, simply the shimmer of the horizon. It was probably best to go back to the van and race toward the 180, hail down any passing car and get somebody to use a phone. Call in the authorities and let himself off the hook. But then again, he didn’t want the road trip to end. His escape would be over. This day, this day of happiness and freedom, would end, and he couldn’t stomach a break in his aimless itinerary.

*Hell*, he thought. A vague sense of fear quickly shifted into exhilaration.

He stood over the body, hands at his sides, breathing through his mouth. Then he bent his knees and pulled the guy over by the shoulder, grimacing, struggling against the dead weight, surprised by his willingness and knowing that somehow this was terribly wrong – that there was an odd feeling in his stomach, some strange timbre in the air, and that he should really just be moving on. And every hair on his body reached

toward the sky; and all at once he was cold, deathly cold, leaping back from the body, hands flailing as a low gurgle came bubbling up his throat, the voice in his head screaming from some unaccountable canyon that the body wasn't just a body: the body was *him*.

As in: Matthew McConaughey. A perfect clone.

Then he was sick, neat and heaving in the dirt, the scrambled eggs and toast he'd had for breakfast and all the lukewarm water he'd sipped on the road. He spat bile, perching on all fours, staring east and straining to breathe. He couldn't think. He waited a minute, two, three, four, let his spinning head clear, let those twisting stomach knots unravel.

*I am hallucinating*, he thought. As he caught his breath, he reviewed the most likely of explanations. Sunstroke. Maybe one of the granola bars or eggs he'd eaten had gone fusty. Food poisoning. Something in the water. Radiation in the air. An acid flashback from '96. He coughed a few more times, blowing his nose in his hands. *Get ready*, he thought. And then he looked again, expecting normalcy to return.

But there was no mistaking a perfect reflection. It was *him*, plain and simple. He tipped back onto his ass, body trembling, staring at some version of himself, face ground into the dirt. *I've lost my shit*, he repeated to himself. *Or – or – this is just some dude who really, really looks like me. Like it's my long-lost brother or something. Has to be.*

There were stranger things in the world, after all. The wind picked up force, sending grains of rock and dust into his mouth and eyes, as if the desert were agreeing with the thought: that this had all the markings of a vision quest or major spiritual battle in the works. He didn't want to think just yet of ghosts or spirits (or demons, or devils, met along some forbidding crossroads), freezing his blood and turning him to mush. It was time to use his head, be rational and get the job done, like all his old acting heroes, the John Waynes and Humphrey Bogarts, the Marlon Brandos and James Deans. He had, for a small but surreally out-of-body moment, the queer impression that he was on a set – that lights and boom mics and cameras were trained on his reaction, and that sooner or later the director would yell *cut!* and this man, this other Matthew, would stand, peel off a mask and walk back to wardrobe. *Oh yeah*, he'd realize, rising to his feet. *I forgot I was making that cameo on The X-Files.*



It was just a moment. He was back to his radiant outdoor reality, collecting himself, trying not to be afraid, banking reasonably on the assumption that this was just a massive coincidence, that the guy was just a fantastic look-alike. Not quite as handsome, on closer inspection. Just a stupendous sort of luck to find such a convincing body double, he thought. Cosmic alignments, et cetera. And what a goddamned *story*! He'd be on *Entertainment Tonight* by tomorrow, smiling across from Bob Goen and Mary Hart, relating how he found a missing person and helped solve a mystery.

There were things to do, though, before he'd be on tv. To get full credit, he couldn't let anyone else find the body; he should transport it to a hospital himself. Besides, that way no one but the doctors would get a look at his twin's genitals, caked in coppery soil. He hadn't even checked the man's pulse. He leaned over the body and pressed his fingers against its neck, searching for a beat. Nothing. *So it's done*, he thought. Time to get it out of the dirt before the elements took it.

He sucked in a deep breath. Then he thrust his hands under the corpse's armpits and began dragging the body toward the van, trying to elevate the torso as much as possible so that only the heels and calves were touching the ground. He puffed and clenched his teeth but it wasn't difficult; he was fit, an iron man, used to running and swimming and struggling with weights. There was the threat of being spotted, of passing traffic spoiling his chance to be the sole transporter, but of course the nameless road was still vacant by the time he reached the vehicle. It (he?) was cumbersome, and scraped up from the drag, but in a few flexing seconds he had the body into the van and stretched prone on the mattress. Matthew pushed through the beads and seated himself behind the wheel, the Dukes still wailing away.

He cranked Cosmo into DRIVE, looking over his right shoulder before swerving onto the road. He had to part the curtain to get a glimpse of his double: lying feet-first toward the rear of the van, arms splayed, one leg slightly bent, penis curled demurely and sand caked beneath finger- and toenails. The body's face was his face, only sleeping: something he'd seen before in a few photographs, or whenever he watched himself close his eyes onscreen. He let the beads fall and turned back to the dash, applying pressure to the pedal.

About ten seconds later he was mashing REC.

‘Okay ... bizarre thing happened to me ... found me ... found me a *body* on the side of the road ... just lying there, naked ... but turns out ... it’s ... *he’s* like my identical twin, or like some clone or something ... craziest ... Continuing to head south ... closest town is Silver Creek, I think ... should be there soon.

‘Ha!’ he cackled, fingers wrapped tight around the wheel. He felt electric, crackling. He wondered how much time had passed: ten minutes? twenty? He couldn’t remember when he’d pulled over. It was like he was blurring along some speed tunnel, unable to tell what the appropriate response should be, the colour of experience smearing into his field of vision. It was funny, it was actually *funny* (which he’d love to tell Sandra, if talking wasn’t something that still might open a wound).

And he wasn’t another mile, the landscape just as vacant, remorseless as stone, a white and shell-like spiral of rock approaching on his left, when he saw another one. This time there was no comic double take or neck-wrenching screech. He saw it well in advance, his jaw falling slack, his hands resuming their tremble, the squashed muscle in his throat releasing a trebly *ohhh*. And without really knowing what he was doing, he crossed to the left side of the road and parked. Then he left the van and shuffled over the windy sand, kicking through scrub over the thirty feet off the asphalt to where the naked body lay crumpled almost exactly like the one he’d just picked up.

He nudged it with a single flip-flopped toe, and a silvery filament of sanity quivered in his imagination, so fine that a strong gust of wind seemed liable to snap it. He shook his head. It was another Matthew, probably dead, naked, with his cheek pressed against the ground, one peaceful, closed lid exposed to the sun.

He crossed his arms and rolled back on his heels. Well, this was certainly something. Cinematic, even. He was the protagonist in some back-roads drama, something existential, inevitably called ‘quirky’ and ‘fun’ and ‘darkly comic’ by the reviewers. Was his acting adequate? Was he conveying the appropriate levels of disbelief, desperation, horror? Or would his dramatic flailing be seen as too *dude-ish*? Would Ebert be ‘much moved’ by his performance?

He felt calmer than he thought he ought to be. It was the acting experience, he knew: the method-acting disassociation, the ability to role-play, to project. He picked up and dragged his double across the asphalt, clutching it around the chest from behind. Once inside the van, he sat it down, limbs floppy, next to the first corpse, which he managed to roll over onto its side while he leaned the second against its back, Siamese bedfellows. He climbed back into the captain's chair with a new, frigid smile stamped on his sweat-drenched face.

After a good swig of water and a stiff slap to the cheeks, he drove on, the terrain unfolding like a gaudy postcard. The sky was a vision of some pagan heaven, he felt, its worship causing a dissociative kind of vertigo: a feeling that deepened, now, to nausea-rekindling degrees, with the spotting of another body. He pulled the van over. And the feeling of sitting there, about to leap from his vehicle and collect another duplicate, somehow held the foreshadowing of routine. There was work to be done, dreadful work, but he had to act, had to attend to each mess of limbs with equal care and comportsment, hefting the new body off the soil and rock, lugging it into the van and lying it down gingerly with its brothers. 'Now there are three,' Matthew said, after it was safely in and with its duplicates. He sucked air, nearly hyperventilating, feeling like some lost terrestrial janitor skipping along the highway of his splintered psyche, tidying up its errant shards. Then breaking into emotion, feeling fatherly, motherly, in the same space of breath, staring down at his three sleeping children, whose faces he covered with one of Cosmo's thin white sheets (though he felt an energy stored and patient beneath the cotton, a lonesome desire from the clones, willing more and more siblings to sprout like pods from the earth – or had *he* fertilized it? Had his droplets of hot urine leached into the soil to produce these cabbage-patch corpses?). The sun felt too hot, too real. What was real? Was the sand on his toes real? Were Academy Awards, or was regret, real? Were buzzards? Were the three sleeping Matthew McConaugheys in the rear of his van real things, flesh and blood, or were they something else? He thrust his arm through the bead curtain, feeling the hair and scalp of one of his copies. 'Something is going to happen,' he said aloud, though now he was certain: that his prophecy was correct, and that *something* was going to break his heart.

Still in PARK, he stared at the shell-like uprising from the ground, unable to force the van farther down the road. He'd sit and wait. Wait until things made sense again, until he could think properly, use the recorder. It would all make sense. But what if the brothers kept coming? What if they kept sprouting from the ground, one after another, as if to punish him? *What if I'm in hell*, he thought.

'I'll have to leave some behind,' he whispered. And with a sudden cough, he wept.



McConaughey wrenched Cosmo toward a trail marked by repeat tire tracks and a worn and beaten feeling. He abandoned the main road because a white puff of cloud had formed what looked like a curved arrowhead, seemingly gesturing to a spot on the horizon. (He was indeed following shapes in clouds; he figured he was past the point of measured responses.) The path ran to the east, around pathetic dunes and ridges. He urged Cosmo on delicately, with only the softest pressure on the gas. He wanted to be tender, as if too much commotion might rouse the three Matthews in the back.

Relief began to bubble and blossom as he followed the trail for another mile, tires dipping in and out of gouges, crunching over the broken earth. He whined in delight with each passing rock, whispering *oh thank you oh thank you* as the path yielded only more mounds of sand and blunt nature, inch by nerve-wracking inch. After the second mile, he began to shout in happiness, punching Cosmo's roof, as if he'd just been spared some deathly sentence. He was free, maybe; there were no more Matthews along the trail.

'I'm sorry,' he groaned, to his own surprise, reaching back to stroke the sprawling arm of one of the clones. There was still the blunt irrefutability of that mass of brotherly flesh. Where would he dump them? Who was going to help him in the middle of the desert? He felt crushed; he closed his eyes and loosened his grip on the steering wheel, letting the vehicle drift beneath him. For a senseless stretch of minutes,

he drove blind, Cosmo veering off the path and into untrammelled dirt. When he opened his eyes, they stung with fresh tears, as a splinter of sunlight made the windshield gleam. He took his foot off the gas completely, let Cosmo rock to a halt. He turned off the engine, leaned his sweaty forehead against the sun-heated wheel and muttered a word, halfway between *can't* and *shit*, but posed as a question. The sky was large and stupid and didn't answer.

Time passed, white. He rose from the wheel and blinked, lids cracking. What kind of so-called *acting* experience could possibly have prepared him? He was a semi-decent actor, a surfer; he liked to throw footballs and smoke bowls and read the odd Michael Crichton novel. You couldn't prep for a role like this; method acting didn't even come close. One body was doable, maybe, but *three*? And *why* three? Why not two, or five, or fifteen? He thought hard. Numbers held power – of this he was, at least, pretty sure. He'd done some reading on numerology, the power of naming. Even had a book on the topic, lost now, with a purple hard-cover, that gave him a basic rundown of things he'd already known about himself: that the combination of letters in *Matthew* translated to the number nine, which meant he was good at following his feelings and emotions; that he was inspiring to others and was well-suited to cooperative work; that he was mostly tolerant of difference, with a broad-minded perspective and compassionate heart (if a bit idealistic); and that he was naturally suited to creative endeavours, to imagination and art. If he allowed himself to falter, he'd be pegged as aloof and insensitive, selfish and indifferent to other people's problems.

From what he could remember, three was the pinnacle number, lorded over by the benevolent planet Jupiter, rich in symbolism of compassion, love and harmony. It was the Holy Trinity, the Golden Triangle and the highest good; it meant sacrifice and giving, Fame and Beauty and Happiness and Wealth, order and stability. LOVE itself, according to the number chart, equalled three. That there were *three* clones, according to numerology, could only mean good – if not absolutely terrifying – things. Matthew chewed on his cheek, thinking. Maybe there were three bodies because each was a third of his whole, just as  $3 \times 3 = 9$ . Maybe each was an equal portion of his psyche, or soul,

or animus, or whatever. That they needed to be put back together. Or that he'd broken himself into pieces.

He turned up the volume on the CD player and rolled down the windows, letting the noise tear into the desert's arrogant silence. He rubbed his face violently. 'The desert was made for pilgrims,' he muttered, or laughed: serious travellers stopping at holy shrines to make offerings, penance, prayers. Stages of a journey of transcendence. He was not a tourist in this waste, but a holy soul, a lover, stopping to reflect with each recovered token. Once again, he hit REC, his voice shaking.

'This is all acting; I'm playing a role. I have three versions of myself in the back of the van. And maybe I'm picking up pieces of all the roles I've nailed ... I mean, really *nailed* ... because I've left too much heart, too much, like, *love* out there in the atmosphere. Too much of Matthew floating around the cosmos. Gotta pick up the pieces, recollect the parts of my *soul*. Feel like a million tiny pieces coming back together!'

This came as a surprise, the thought that his mood or depression was really a scattering, a feeling of being disassembled. Like he'd lost a sense of who he was and wanted to be, the Matthew of his imagination, the Matthew he was *proud* to be. He'd given it away to people, to agents and extras and advertisers. The media writers, the mooching groupies. He'd given a large chunk to Sandra, maybe the largest of all. There were far too many versions of himself floating disembodied in the ether, and now the blankness had responded, conjuring out of the expanse those dreadful visions of what he'd lost. He was a fool to think he was just using his head. The heart was always involved. Intimately. He nearly leapt from his seat.

'Okay! I'm listening!' he bellowed into the air, following up with a jackal-like laugh. 'I hear you! I'm *available*!' The wind made no answer. He listened to its breathy incoherence, sticking his head out the window like a panting dog. An insect flew into his mouth and squirmed against his throat; he swallowed. He imagined the relief in releasing his fear, his sorrow, his clutching attachment to trifling icons, karma and voodoo and spiritualism. Falling back into his seat, he tore the Smoking Indian from his rear-view, snapping the dental floss and whipping the brown figurine out the window. He'd rip out and discard all his paltry wards and possessions, offer them up to the void.

After all the tokens had been thrown away and his body was squelching with sweat, the sky was less of a pure, earnest blue; it was deeper and richer to the east. The sun was lower, glowing orange, the thin surrounding clouds swelling with blood. In a few hours there would be one of those dazzling desert sunsets he loved: the atmosphere thrown into indigo and violet, great bars of colour not unlike a punishing, sky-stretching rainbow. The heat had already broken.

He would have to make a decision. Something had to be done with the brothers. He reviewed his options, drinking mineral water thirstily. There was the path of covert disposal. Burial. Cremation. That was easiest; he had enough gasoline. Or, the strangest yet most sensible: drive to town and civilization, hand them over to some hospital's forensic specialist, receive a 'scientific' explanation. This – the worldly, scientific solution – would require the most courage. Perhaps it was best. Hand off the bodies, get a sliver of a rationalization, rather than ditch the clones and leave all his pain and confusion in the unresponsive wild.

As he scanned the horizon, a small variation of light caught his eye. To the south and east was a distant, ground-level glimmer. He focused and looked. It was something metallic – the fierce rays of the sun's passing lustre rebounding off a metal surface. The sudden thought of somebody, *anybody*, giving him a hand was too sweet and relieving to refuse. He was stupid to have left the road, to have followed a cloudy arrowhead. He should have rushed back to the 180 the minute he found the first body. He cranked the keys and gunned Cosmo toward the reflective surface.

The drive overland was rough, full of worry that the pile of Matthews would awaken. As he closed in, he spotted a rectangular cement structure painted a creamy yellow that made it partially blend into the landscape. The glint Matthew had followed was a bead of light reflecting off a wilted stretch of chain-link fence dangling from its connecting supports. In front of the building was a concrete, cubic block that sank into the earth. Another hotly reflective metal, which looked like a ventilation shaft, ran alongside the concrete. Cosmo bumped and jostled over the torturous ground. The main structure was two storeys, shot with perfectly square, glassless windows. It was dark inside. Someone had spray-painted

a neon-green swath across the side, its original message lost to the wind's persistence. The ground swelled up to meet the base, or camp, or facility; an abandoned workstation, probably commissioned by the government. Matthew was about to hit the brakes, discouraged, and head for the highway, when he saw someone sitting on the steps of the building's vacant doorway.

The figure – a hiker, a tourist, whoever – was a calm drop of moisture in so much dryness, a salve to his cracked lips and the hot finger of heat poking the back of his skull. Matthew pressed the pedal and nosed through a gap in the diminished fence, four-wheel drive accelerating and sputtering uphill. Near the building's looming shadow, he reached behind him and freed a wrinkled Longhorns T-shirt from beneath a stone-like ankle. He stopped the van, donned the shirt and stepped onto the soil, wearing a friendly smile, a *you're not gonna believe this, but* expression. Maybe so-and-so would recognize him; celebrity could always help.

He looked and then lost his breath. It was the worst kind of recognition: as if he'd been walking with his head down, his eyes full of sleep, counting his steps on some warm and even pavement of Los Angeles, and before he could be collected and witty and put together, she was there before him, nearly bumping into him. And of course ruining him, making him blush wildly, making him curse the luck that brought him like a homer toward her through the million chancing alleys of a metropolitan city. Making him feel that something spiritual had intervened to make them meet.

He stood a few feet before the cubic slab of concrete. Sandra rose from the stairs, brushing her jeans of what the wind carried. She wore a T-shirt he hadn't seen before: an evergreen. She smiled at him across the fifty feet of soil, and the wind blew her hair into a straight line, pointing west. She looked skinnier than he remembered; he focused on her collarbone, the knobs of her wrists and hips, blinking as grit and dust cut across his bare, sunburnt face. Then she was walking toward him, the same slow stride.

He knew then that he'd stumbled into fantasy – that at some point in the remote distance of the day, waking reality had slipped into dream. Why else were there bodies, identical triplets? Though he was lucid, the



direction of the dream was out of his control. He would have to be brave and trust to feeling – *like being on drugs*, he thought – you had to let the flowers bloom unmolested, allow the petals to fall as they wished. He closed his eyes until he heard her scraping footsteps before him. *Wake up*, he told himself, but the world didn't change. He opened his eyes and took in the full sight of her, standing two feet away.

'Where are we?' he asked after a beat, throat cracking with dryness.

'What do you mean?' Her voice was the same, but newer, like listening to a recording of his own.

'Ah, hell,' he said, pointlessly, catching a tone between baffled and bemused.

She kept smiling. The desert still, hushed, gathered around to watch them.

'This is a bomb shelter,' she said, as if amused by the word *bomb*. 'Cold War relic, you know. Not many people know about it.'

'You were waiting for me?'

'Why not?' She took a step forward. Matthew wanted to back away but his legs felt too heavy. Sandra curled a pinky finger around his, hanging loose and slack at his side. The finger sent a warm shock up his arm, through his neck, making him salivate. She was inches away and smelled of green things, of juice and fruit, citrus and lime. Beneath this airy smell there was the scent of rot somewhere. Her cheekbones were so defined they seemed chiselled from the ridges that surrounded them. He saw the small scar on her jaw that makeup and cameras typically covered up – a line he'd traced and retraced with his thumb, kissed. Her neck was dirty, but her sweat made long and clear lines in the soot.

'How'd you get out here?' he asked.

She looked in his eyes. Her brow knit in sympathy. 'I got a ride.'

'Ahh,' he said. He found he was smiling, too, though nothing was well. His free hand went looking for hers, tugging at her fingers. 'Ahh.'

'Want to get started?' she asked.

Matthew looked down, staring at her dusty sandals, the zipper of her jeans and her shirt's hemline. He was nodding. She knew about the bodies, the brothers. It was like someone knowing your filthy secrets. She radiated knowing. He kept nodding, conscious of the work to do,

but it didn't feel right to waste what light they had by handling such ridiculous cargo. He'd driven out to the middle of nothing and found her here, after months of separation. They should be sitting together in the doorway, watching the sun descend and ravish the sky. They should be driving to Silver Creek, where there were motels and soap and clean sheets. L.A. waited for them in the west, the coffee shops and bars and restaurants where her dark eyes glowed in the dancing light of a candle. There were conversations left unfinished, the last word on every subject left hanging and deferred. He thought he was healing but the wound hadn't even closed.

He wanted to remind her of a phone call he'd made a few weeks after their breakup. It was stagey, like an audition – he was channelling all the rainy regret of the season, drunk on Jim Beam and standing against the door to his bedroom, the phone cord wrapped around his fist. It was after two in the morning and he stood whispering into the receiver, reasoning with her, bargaining for a solution. Saying maybe they'd been too hasty. He didn't want to start promoting *The Newton Boys* without someone out there waiting for him, someone who knew his secret weaknesses, someone to counsel and support him. He was drunk and weak, weaker than he'd ever felt, but she kept saying the same thing, like a chant: *No, Matty*, unwavering, despite his plea bargains, his careful arguments, his gambits and his begging. And when it was done, when there was nothing left to say and resentment rose against her tireless denials, her strength, he threw down the receiver and sunk into bed, exhausted and sick of himself. He wanted to remind her of that last conversation – how hard it was on him. He wanted to tell her that she'd never given him a second chance; that maybe if he'd gotten the reviews he deserved for *Amistad*, say, she would have acted differently. That maybe it was all about careers, in the end – their stupid, absurd careers sabotaging something so alive between them. He wanted to call her a bitch, an idiot for letting him go, cruel for blowing him off when he needed her most.

'I miss you so much,' he found himself saying, staring at the patch of earth between her feet. He waited for her to answer, clutching her hands harder than he meant. The light was changing. Then he heard her say, 'I

know,' and she slid her hands up past his wrists and over the back of his arms, letting him take her into an embrace, and upon feeling the heat of her body he found himself sobbing, loud and hard against the citrusy, rotten smell of her new T-shirt, smelling her hair and her sweat, arms pawing and clutching at the fabric around her back. He watched, felt himself doing this, surprised at the show. His snot and spit pooled on her shoulder. He held her as hard as he could, whispering, 'Wake up, wake up,' still convinced that this was all made of dreams and dust.

'Please?' he asked, choking on the *l*. He knew he shouldn't have asked, knew it was useless. He pulled back.

Sandra shook her head, but not without kindness. 'We should finish,' she said firmly, withdrawing, gesturing toward Cosmo with her eyes.

Matthew wiped his nose, sniffing. 'Ah, hell,' he said again. The light was rich and fiery in her eyes. 'So what are we doing?' he asked.

'There's a place for them underground,' she said, pushing her hair over her ears, which stood out gawky and endearing from the sides of her head. 'Through here.' She pointed at the rise of concrete beside the metal ventilation shaft. There was a steel door set into the pasty yellow material. Matthew walked to the door and placed his fingers against the cool of the latch. It swung out with a stiff yank, whining on ancient, rusted hinges. Beyond were five feet of white cement floor, then a flight of stairs sinking down into absolute black, ageless and still.

Sandra stepped into the foyer of the shelter and picked up a flashlight from the floor, setting the beam on the top step, illuminating the short flight of stairs, the limits of a room beyond. Then she turned back to Matthew, smiling again: that same sad, resolved smile.

*We'll do it together*, he thought. *We'll carry the trio down the stairs, one at a time, and leave them there.* It was senseless, meaningless, but it was a plan. Down beneath the soil, where his three sleeping triplets could hear the whispers of the earth, the insane god beneath their feet. Where they would rot unmolested. It was what she wanted, at any rate, and he'd always gone along with her notions.

So they began. Matthew held each twin around the chest while Sandra gripped its ankles. He went down backwards, shuffling on the stairs and disturbing clouds of choking dust. They grunted and sweated,

wiping their foreheads with their T-shirts and steadying themselves in the foyer before inching down the stairs. The room at the bottom was large – much larger than he'd imagined. They laid the bodies evenly and with care: head to toe, head to toe. She'd run up the stairs before him, meet him at the van, the wind rising now and then to make her flatten and rake at her hair. The sky's pallet became awful, extraterrestrial. Jewelled stars and streaks of gases appeared in the east, growing a deeper and deeper blue. He unscrewed the caps on a pair of water bottles and they drank, gulping savagely. They'd made it to the final body, staring into the western skyline and wondering what sweet brute could have made a world so organized, so painful, so generous. 'So beautiful,' he said to her, not knowing what to say, exactly, but feeling as if he could say anything in the world, leaning one arm on Cosmo's now radiant, sun-streaked door and gazing into the fading heat. And they returned to the long, back-breaking struggle, freighting the last body into its tomb.

After the Matthews were laid to rest, she ran up the stairs as before, but he didn't follow. Lingered there in the cool grave, he walked a slow circle around the square room. He could barely see, save for what was caught in the flashlight's patch of yellow. He looked at their sleeping faces, feeling the weight so heavy above him, the compact pounds of dirt and rock and cement, the fine filigree of dust that covered the world. He kneeled and took one of the heads in his hands, kissing it slow and on the brow, not knowing what he was doing, if this was right. *It doesn't matter*, he thought. *We make ourselves at every moment*. Looking around the room, seeing this kinship of flesh, he sighed, knowing this was the last look. He was okay with that. They were copies, but not essential. They didn't have his memories, his sense of humour, his heart. They could be buried, left in the dirt. He could forget.

He walked up the steps. Sandra stood halfway to the facility, hands in her pockets, staring into the boundless sky.

'So, hey,' he said, walking toward her. 'I really don't know what I'm saying. I guess I'm gonna go. It's gonna get real cold out here. You'd better come with me in Cos.'

'No, thanks,' she said quietly. 'I'm waiting on a ride of my own.'

He could have predicted as much. This wasn't really Sandra, anyway, he figured. It was a stand-in. Another kind of clone he'd discovered, or recovered, from all this waste. He took a deep, noisy breath, imagining what would happen if he stayed out here past dark, waiting for Sandra's ride. Who would be coming to pick her up. Another *third* actor. Another triangle. What nightmares in the final night, watching her climb into some weird jeep. He wasn't meant to stay and watch. This part of the story didn't involve him.

She was looking back at the sunlight. He felt less sadness now, watching her in profile. He'd meet her again, and it would be in a city, surrounded by the assembled regiments of sanity. She'd remember nothing of this (not that he'd ever bring it up – or if he did, he'd only hint at the time spent in the desert, near a bomb shelter, to which she'd just laugh and shake her head, say *you're crazy*, give him one of those confused, amused glances he was so used to). He turned and kicked through the darkening stretch of sand, slamming the metal door to the shelter on his way.

Cosmo felt good. He regretted tossing away the Native American symbols. He'd defaced his own environment, this mobile extension of his youth. He shook his head; it was a moment of weakness when faced with such strange adversity. But everything would be better, he thought; he'd buried his three brothers safe into the ground's receiving womb. He was lucky, extraordinarily lucky: he was able to say he'd buried himself. He kicked the van into *DRIVE* and turned on the headlights. He'd need them on the dark scrub, roaring back to the main roads and racing north, for the trip was definitely over. Before sliding down the hill in reverse, he caught Sandra in his lights: rubbing her arms, tiny and green, squinting into the harshness of the glare. It was the way he'd leave her, stuck in memory as if in amber, left alone and waiting for her ghosts and rides. He honked the horn, wheeled about and headed north.

Everything – the ground, the rattling frame, the rumbling engine – felt good. He pushed *PLAY* on the stereo, the Amboy Dukes launching back into the first song on the CD: 'Journey to the Centre of the Mind.' After the first verse and chorus, he hummed along with the lyrics, savouring the psychedelia, the drugstore mysticism.

And then he laughed, long and happy. They were stupid lyrics. They were written during a ridiculous time to be alive – a time when bomb shelters were still serious investments. He weighed the word in his mouth as he rolled onto the nameless, north-south road. *Bomb*. How Sandra’s stand-in had said it so oddly. She’d emphasized the *om* inside it. The *om* in *bomb*, kind of like the *om* in *tomb*, in *womb*, but just pronounced differently. It was dumb and profound, but he tried it out on his tongue, a low monotone hum: *ommm*.

It meant peace, he thought. It was a word that meant nothing, and nothing meant peace.

*OM.*

He had an idea, passing just beyond the reach of his understanding. He hit REC.