

Corn Syrup

Dragon

Siobhán Áine Cassandra Quille

The wild kit fox has an average lifespan of five and a half years. Even in its relatively brief existence, the creature is no stranger to premature death, as evidenced by the skull laying here in the middle of this desert highway. Despite the short life, there is a story here, likely unknown to all but the one that is no longer with us. Seeing its skull bake in the sun, separated from the rest of its bones, it's hard to say if this kit ever stood a chance in the first place.

"I was just a kid when I first had a taste."

A car speeds down the desert highway.

"It was like, a limited time thing. A promotion for a movie or something."

A bright red hood shines in the sun.

"And it's not just a flavor of ice cream."

A license plate reading 1 SCR33M.

"There was nothing else like it. There is nothing else."

A bird of prey lets out its cry somewhere in the distance.

"I've tried to recreate it countless times. Always to no avail."

A pop sounds off, followed by screeching tires.

Marshall stands next to Agnes, a 1999 Chevy Malibu shitbox with a bright red paint job, looking out into the distance while a AAA mechanic changes one of Agnes' tires.

"But recently, I decided to take some real initiative for once. I found the address of the company's factory and mapped out a campaign. Which brings my story to here, out on the open road, in search of the recipe for that sweet, sweet frozen ambrosia."

"Uh, sounds cool, man." The mechanic stands up. "There seemed to be some bone fragments in your old tire. Probably how it popped."

A brief yet still awkward pause takes place. Marshall's smirk doesn't falter. His sunglasses hide nothing.

"I'm done here." The mechanic climbs into his truck. "Have a nice

day. And be careful.”

That last sentence is delivered with direct eye contact. Marshall thinks nothing of it.

~

Marshall and Agnes tear through the desert at a not-so-legal but still reasonable speed. The smirk found on the driver’s face an hour prior has since transformed into an excited smile. Another hour passes before they pull into a chain convenience store. The sign atop the business reads ‘Oasis’, with smaller letters below the logo spelling out ‘Everything but room & board!’.

He strides into the store, making his way to the candy aisle while dodging the mascot merchandise bursting out of the shelves and displays near the entrance. He focuses on two adjacent rows of boxes, one labeled Mike’s and the other Ike’s. His eyes dart back and forth between them until his gut growls, which prompts him to walk toward the restaurant section of the expansive rest stop establishment.

He looks up at the menu hanging above the counter and zeroes in on the chicken tenders and fries combo without reading anything else. He orders his food with the vacant-eyed cashier and reaches for a small plastic stand with a number printed on it. The cashier stops him.

“You don’t need that.”

“Oh. I thought we were just supposed to do it anyway, y’know?”

“Yeah, but you’re, like, the only one here.”

Marshall turns his head to look at the empty eatery.

“Oh.”

His order is called as soon as he settles into a seat. He grabs it from the counter, sits back down, pauses to judge the food’s visual quality, and proceeds to eat away. During his meal he glances out the window and notices a strange vehicle in the parking lot.

What kind of car is that? Why’s the back so big? Is it some sort of limo?

He pauses eating to stare at the hearse, expecting something to happen. Nothing does.

No plates and jet black all over. Whatever it is, it’s giving me the heebie-jeebies.

Marshall finishes his food and unconfidently waves goodbye to the cashier—who does not see him—as he exits the building. The hearse is now in a different parking spot, slightly closer to Agnes than before. He walks toward his inanimate steed with uneasiness on his face. He makes a sudden turn to look behind his back but finds no one. He gets in his car and drives away.

~~

The duo drive down the desert highway into the sunset and Marshall realizes he's been anxiously checking the rearview mirror over and over. He turns on the radio in hopes of finding distraction.

"And you're back with Triple-D DDDixon. I'm cracked out—whacked out—an all-around menace to society, and I'm playing the greatest hits of you and your grandma's yesteryears. Here's a good one from a band that deserved a bit more than they got."

An unforgettable drum intro starts to help Marshall calm down. He turns the volume dial up. Though he quickly finds that even with his favorite one-hit wonder from his childhood playing extra loud, he cannot stop thinking about that weird car. He turns the radio off and starts mumbling to himself.

"That song's overrated anyways. They had better options for the sing..le..."

The hearse is in the rearview.

The dark driver stays at a safe distance from Team Ice Cream, matching their speed. Marshall forces his eyes to focus on the road in front of them.

Is it following me? What if it stops the next time I do? What should I do? What will its driver do?

He looks back at the rearview and sees the hearse is now slightly closer. He turns the radio back on and the volume up higher than before.

~~

At the grey area between late night and early morning, Marshall drives while taking prolonged blinks. He becomes aware of this and perks up, immediately scanning for the hearse. Agnes appears to be the only automobile out tonight. Eventually they reach a town and cruise through until locating a motel.

He pulls into the parking lot, gets out of the car, and walks into the motel's equivalent of a lobby through an ajar door. Little is found in the small room aside from a reception desk placed opposite the entrance and a lone antique chair seated next to the entrance. Yellow lighting accompanied by a smell that mixes carpet cleaner and his grandparent's house hangs in the air.

There's no one at the desk, so he approaches it and presses the call bell. No voice nor footstep is heard. He presses again. Still nothing. The sound of his third ring is spoken over by a small woman who is now suddenly sat behind the desk. She speaks without looking at Marshall.

"Once is enough, you know."

"Jeez Louise! When'd you get here?"

The woman takes a name tag saying 'LOUISE' off of her shirt. She

continues talking with her eyes trained on the outdated desktop computer set up in front of her and to the right of Marshall.

“What do you need?”

“A room. Just for tonight. I actually have to get going bright and early tomorrow. You see, I’m on this quest—”

“Cash or card?”

“Card. Debit.”

The motel manager swiftly types at the computer. Then follows a moment of silence as she stares at the screen that is just long enough for him to become uncomfortable.

“Can I see some form of I.D.?”

“Yeah, sure. Here.”

He fumbles to retrieve his wallet with just a touch of visible anxiety. He hands over his driver’s license. The manager holds it up and Marshall is making the exact same large smile at her right now as he is in the photo. She once again types with furious speed. Another uncomfortable moment of silence. She opens a drawer and rummages through it before pulling out a key.

“You’re in Room 2, two doors down from here.” She makes a hand gesture in the direction of the door as if Marshall weren’t right in front of her. “9AM check out time okay?”

“Y-Yes. Thank you.”

He begins to walk out of the office. As he makes the door even more ajar to complete his exit, he turns back around.

“Have a nice nigh—”

The motel manager is glaring right at him with intense eye contact. He hurries out the door.

Marshall walks over to Agnes and starts to trace his fingers along the space below the car’s hood as he gazes into the night sky. He looks back down to Earth and sees a parent and child strolling through the parking lot. Both are holding ice cream. Marshall’s fist tightens, then loosens up before he places his hand on the car’s hood and gently pats it.

~~

Marshall sits at a diner booth in front of a half-eaten plate of hash browns and scrambled eggs with a generous drizzle of ketchup on top while sipping orange juice and scrolling on his cellphone. He happens to look out the window just in time to see the hearse slowly cruising down the street. Fear takes over his face. A tall waitress walks up and places a bill on the edge of his table, then speaks with a smile.

“Whenever you’re ready.”

He keeps his frightened eyes fixed out the window on the hearse,

which is just about to pass through visibility.

“Are you good, dude?”

He snaps out of his trance and looks over at the uniformed woman towering above him. He puts his phone in the front pocket of his jeans.

“Oh! Yeah. I’m fine. Thank you.” He shovels the remainder of his breakfast in his mouth while examining the bill.

“Of course. Well, whenever you’re ready.” The waitress turns away from the table as Marshall is sifting through his Velcro-secured wallet.

“Say, do you get cars like that around here often?” He says before briefly gesturing in the vague direction of the hearse’s last-known location.

“You mean that bright red one right out front? Sure, but not in that color. Man, talk about garish.”

He jams his hand into his other pocket. “No, no. The shiny all-black one that just passed by.” He drinks the last of the orange juice in one gulp.

“Didn’t see it. Sorry dude.”

He exhales and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand in an exaggerated motion. “Ah, damn.”

He shoots up from his seat and slams cash down on the table. As he rushes towards the exit, he speaks in bursts.

“That’s too bad!—Thank you anyways!—Have a nice day...!”

The waitress watches Marshall through the windows as he runs into the parking lot. She picks up his money and counts it.

“Huh. Exact change.”

Marshall runs past Agnes and a small handful of other members of her species and onto the sidewalk. The hearse is nowhere to be seen. He puts his hands on his knees and slumps his torso toward the ground, breathing heavily.

“You alright, stranger?”

He raises his head at the sound of the unfamiliar voice behind him. He stands upright and turns to face a disheveled older man with long, unkempt facial hair sitting on a bus stop bench.

“What? Oh. No, yeah. I’m fine. Doing pretty great, actually.”

The older man looks him up and down with skepticism. Marshall’s breaths are still just labored enough to be concerning.

“Uh, alright. Just asking, ‘cause you looked pretty distressed a moment ago.”

“Huh? Oh, you mean—Nah, I was fine. I just thought I saw something...strange. In the distance. In the sky. Whatever, that’s in the past now. Practically ancient history by this point.”

Marshall attempts to casually lean against a nearby signpost, but it is slightly too far from where he stands, so he awkwardly extends his body

to reach it. Marshall adjusts his footing and fakes a smile.

“HA! You sound like a forward-thinking guy.”

The man then mimics Marshall’s pose from where he sits on the bus bench. The two stare at each other for a moment before the older man starts cackling. Marshall looks on in confusion while the laughter fizzles out.

“Name’s Joseph.”

“I’m Marshall.”

Marshall shambles over to sit next to Joseph. He plops his body down and hunches over, elbows on his knees and palms cradling his jaw. Joseph maintains an upright but relaxed position while looking out onto the street in front of them. He leans toward Marshall slightly as he speaks to him.

“I liked what you said.”

“I’m Marshall’?”

“Wow, you really do live in the present. No, the ‘ancient history’ thing. Tells me you’re the kind of guy who’s always moving forward. Like a shark.”

“I guess so.”

“Yup, no time to dwell on the past for guys like you. Admire it, really. Very different lifestyle from mine.” Joseph’s line of sight trails off into the distance as he finishes his statement.

“Really?”

“Yeah...Was a bit of a past-dweller. Still am, I’d say.” Joseph looks down wistfully.

“How so? You seem to be here right now.” Marshall looks at Joseph more attentively.

“Used to collect things. Would drive to different states just to buy stuff I found online.”

“What kind of things did you collect?”

“Figures and such of stuff I liked as a kid. Lunchboxes and glasses with characters and logos on them. Memorabilia. Though I guess they weren’t made to be memorabilia...”

“You said you used to do it. What made you stop?”

Joseph looks at Marshall with a serious face. “It got to a point where most of my time and money went into finding these things. I had to stand back and look at myself.”

“What did you see?”

Joseph looks out again. “A guy so tunnel-visioned he didn’t notice everyone had left him until it was too late.”

Marshall’s eyes look away and around until he fixes his vision downward. Then follows a quiet that he ends up breaking while forcing himself to look back at Joseph.

“What’d you do with the memorabilia?”

“Sold it. Took a while because I wanted to make sure I made my investment back. Had to be done, though, since it all carried new memories of a different investment I would never get back.”

“And now you’re homeless.” Marshall gazes out into the distance as something supposedly profound settles in his mind.

Joseph turns to look at him with a mix of confusion and offense.

“What? I’m not homeless. What made you think that?”

Marshall suddenly sits upright, now more animated and looking at Joseph but dodging eye contact entirely. “Well, I mean, I guess nothing really, I just assumed ‘cause, uh...I’m from a city with a large unhoused population, so it didn’t strike me as unrealisti—”

“Calm down, Shark. What are you doing here anyways? Said you aren’t from here.”

“I’m on a quest.” Marshall calms down and hunches back over.

“A what?”

Marshall sighs. “I’m on a road trip.”

“Any destination, or just looking to see whatever’s along the way back home?”

“I’m heading to the factory of an ice cream company.”

“They do tours or something?”

“No. I’m trying to find the recipe for a discontinued flavor of ice cream I loved as a kid.”

The two sit for another pause, this time accompanied by a different kind of quiet.

“The people at the factory know you’re coming? You have an appointment or something?”

“Um, well, no. I did call the company a while ago to try to get the recipe, but that didn’t work.”

“So...what, then. You going to drive to this factory and break in?”

“If I have to.”

A bus pulls over to the curb. Joseph gets up.

“Make sure there aren’t any more ice cream recipes after this one.”

Joseph steps onto the bus. “Goodbye, Marshall.”

He watches the bus drive down the street in the direction opposite to the one the hearse had gone.

~

Marshall and Agnes continue their campaign, racing through the flat terrain on an even flatter road under a cloudless sky. The sun beams down on, well, everything as Marshall thinks to himself so as not to upset Agnes.

‘Any more ice cream recipes’? What was he on about? There are no

more recipes. Nothing else even compares to this one.

The irritation on his face fades into something more sad.

If I don't find it there, it's not like there'll be any substitute.

His brow arches down and he presses a little harder on the gas.

It'll be there. It has to be.

The pair come upon a set of off/on ramps when Marshall notices a person holding out their thumb on the side of the road in between the ramps. The mild dejection on his face turns into mild excitement. He pulls over, rolls down the window, and lifts his sunglasses up to talk.

"You uh, you going this way?"

"I would be on the other side of the road if I wasn't," the hitchhiker responds while shielding their eyes from the sun.

His smile is replaced by a look of slight confusion, yet the smile still peeks through.

"I'm just giving you a hard time. Are you offering a ride?"

"Planning on it. But I can only take you as far as Dale Valley."

"I only need to go to Santa Angustia."

"That is certainly doable. Let's get rolling."

Marshall flicks down his sunglasses and points a finger gun forward. Then he remembers he must unlock the passenger side door and does so as his friendly smile reforms into something more apologetic. The hitchhiker gets in Agnes and the trio take off.

"Your car is...red. Really red."

"Yeah, got it done custom. They didn't make this model in this color."

"I wonder why."

"That's what I said! Man, it's cool to meet someone with similar tastes."

The hitchhiker nods insincerely and looks out the passenger seat window.

"Her name is Agnes, by the way." He pats the dashboard with his right hand.

"Who? The car?" They look back at him.

"Yeah!"

"I've never actually met anyone who named their car. I thought people only did that in movies."

"I like movies too."

Quiet resumes for a bit. Marshall stays smiling until he makes a face as if he remembered something.

"Oh! My name is Marshall. What's yours?"

"I...haven't decided yet." They look away from the driver.

"Ooh. Cool and mysterious! What takes you to Santa Angustia?"

“Oh, change of pace, change of scenery. And I didn’t feel particularly wanted back home. If I can even call it that anymore...”

“Sounds heavy.”

“Cause it is.”

Marshall’s smile falters. “So...why Angustia? Is it that much better than not-home?”

The hitchhiker shifts in their seat but keeps their gaze fixed out the window. “Not by a whole lot. But I have friends out there, so it’s better than other options. Like Dale Valley.”

“Heh, yeah. What a weird name too. Dale Valley.”

“Doesn’t dale already mean valley? Or some type of valley?”

“I think so, yeah. It’s basically just Valley Valley.” The smile on his face changes from one of intentional friendliness to one of natural joy.

The hitchhiker giggles. “That’s like naming a place ‘Valley Glen’ or ‘Glendale’.”

“HA! Yeah...”

The travelers chuckle together at the absurd world they’ve crafted.

“What has you out here anyways?”

“I’m on a quest.”

“That’s an interesting word to use so seriously. What is this quest, pray tell?”

“You see, years ago, this ice cream company had a limited-time flavor, and it was the best thing ever, but eventually they stopped making it.” He switches his view back and forth between the road and his companion as he talks.

“So you’re hunting down the last pint of it?”

“No.” He turns his head to look at the hitchhiker with a grin full of misguided confidence while holding up one thumb. “I’m hunting down the recipe.” He looks back to the road.

“Where’re you going then?”

“The company’s factory. Or maybe it’s the packaging plant...anyway, I suspect they’ll have the answer I’m looking for.”

“What’s your plan? You’re gonna get a tour and sneak off into the restricted areas? Infiltration, stealth mission?”

“No, no, they don’t do tours.”

“You have someone on the inside? A mole?”

“No...no.”

“So...B ‘n’ E?”

“B and E.” Marshal nods. He then leans his upper body towards his new friend while keeping his eyes on the road. “If it comes to that.”

“You’re a little weird, Marshall.”

“That’s funny, my mom says the same thing.”

“It’s not an unreasonable reaction for someone learning about your ‘quest’.”

“Oh, no, she said that before I got the idea for this.”

“In what context did she say it then?”

“She just said it in, like, general. She’s said it a couple times before.”

Agnes zooms past a sign that reads ‘Santa Angustia – 2 MILES’.

Soon, the group reach the small city and cruise through.

“Where should I drop you off? Are your friends expecting you anywhere specific?”

“No, they said to let them know where I was when I got here.” They are slumped in their seat when they glance out the windshield. “Man, I could use a coffee. Could you just drop me off at that place on the corner?”

Marshall pulls into the chain coffee shop’s tiny, overpopulated parking lot. The hitchhiker gets out of the car and stands holding open the door, bent over to look in at Marshall.

“This is goodbye then.”

“That it does seem.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, No Name.”

No Name smiles warmly. “Likewise, Marshall.” They stand up straight. “And you too, Agnes.” They shut the car door and pat the roof.

Marshall drives away through Santa Angustia. As he is departing the city and getting on the highway, his look of contentedness adjusts suddenly.

“AGH! I should’ve asked for their email!!”

~~

Marshall stares into the night sky as he fills his car’s tank and realizes he never knew there were this many stars visible from Earth. Before his thoughts can take their next steps into an existential confrontation with our humble planet’s insignificance in the grand scheme of infinity, he notices something familiar in his peripherals—the hearse, parked just out of the light supplied by Gas Station, Nowhere. He furrows his brow, marches over to the imposing vehicle, and knocks on the driver’s side window. Impatiently, he extends his arm to knock again but is stopped by the window rolling down ever-so-slightly. A slip of paper slowly slides out of the opening and a deep, quiet voice speaks from within.

“You’re gonna want the corporate offices, not the factory.”

Marshall grabs the slip of paper and reads it. It’s an address. He looks up with wonder. He looks back down at the hearse and opens his mouth to speak but is interrupted.

“Go.”

Marshall’s face is filled with determination as he clutches the paper.

He runs to Agnes, then abruptly turns in the direction of the gas station convenience store. He sprints through the automatic doors and screeches to a halt at the cash register. He addresses the cashier slumped over the counter with unprecedented assertiveness.

“One large coffee, please!”

“It—It’s, like, a self-serve machine.”

“Right!”

He briskly walks to the coffee machine, fixes up a large cup, and briskly walks back to the register. He slams his coffee down on the counter and stares through the cashier. The cashier slowly blinks.

“That’s, uhm, four-fifty.”

He tosses three singles and a two-dollar bill on the counter and swiftly exits.

“Keep the change...!”

After jumping into Agnes, he sets his beverage down in the cupholder, puts on his seatbelt, turns the key in the ignition, gingerly picks up the coffee to take a careful sip, and speeds off into the night.

~~

The ice cream company’s corporate office building sits in a remarkably flat area near a highway and a small number of other grey rectangular buildings with a low but still multiple count of stories. Few souls stir here in this early, early morning, as the drained souls of the offices’ employees don’t clock in for another couple hours. The desert’s natural tranquility overpowers the negative energy that emanates from corporate headquarters like these, and all remains calm. That is, until Marshall and Agnes tear into the parking lot.

He takes a swig of his coffee before hopping out. The digital clock on the dash displays a time well after 3AM. He pops open the trunk, pulls out a backpack, slings it over his shoulder, and shuts the trunk. He then scurries over to the building’s front entrance in a crouching pose. He takes off the backpack and retrieves a magician’s lockpicking kit, which he successfully uses to open the doors.

Somewhere within the building, a tall security guard sits at a desk twiddling his thumbs. Repeated beeps from the computer in front of him catch his attention. He picks up a walkie-talkie to contact his coworker while ignoring the many screens, one showing a camera feed of a strangely determined young man on the first floor.

Marshall sneaks past the reception desk and finds a map of the building on a wall next to two elevators. He traces his finger over the image until he locates the records room, then heads for the stairs.

“Bravo, come in.”

“I keep telling you, there’s only two of us. We don’t need codenames.” responds Bravo from another part of the building.

“I think you set the silent alarm off by mistake. Over.”

Marshall, in half of a crouching pose, sidles down a hallway an inch or two away from the wall until he reaches the records room. He tries the handle, but it’s locked. The magician’s kit gets another point towards justifying its purchase.

“I don’t think I did.”

“Well there’s nothing unusual on the cameras, and you’re the one who isn’t sitting in this room. Over.”

“I’m patrolling, but I’m not opening any doors.”

“The silent alarm says otherwise. Over.”

The records room is filled with numerous rows of shoulder-high filing cabinets. A printed guide to the categories of files is pinned to the wall next to the door. Marshall examines this guide before proceeding with purpose into the filing cabinet forest.

“You want me to do a sweep? Will that satisfy you?”

“...maybe. Over.” He glances at the camera feeds as he finishes his statement and sees the young man sifting through files.

“Okay. Fine. I’ll do a sweep tonight. Another one.”

“Hey-hey! We got an unknown individual in the building!”

“What? You sure that isn’t me?”

“I’m sure. Meet me outside the records room.”

The tall guard holsters his walkie-talkie and begins to leave his chair but stops and grabs the radio once more.

“Over.”

Bravo puts his own walkie-talkie away and pauses the video playing on his cellphone that he’s holding up sideways in front of his raised knees. He gets up off the floor and walks around the corner to the records room.

The tall guard hurries out of the camera room and through a door that leads to the space behind the reception desk. He makes the motions of a running start to hop over the desk but stops after a single step and walks around it.

Marshall flips through a group of files organized under ‘D’ for ‘Decommissioned’ within the recipe cabinet.

“Why aren’t they alphabetized within the section? If I wasn’t trying to get out of here quickly, I’d reorganize some of these—”

He sees it. What he’s been searching for, what’s been kept from him for so many years. The doorknob turns. The stars in his eyes disappear as he looks up like a deer in headlights. He grabs the file and slides it into his backpack while taking out two concealed items.

Tall and Bravo enter the room. Marshall is already standing. He and the guards stare each other down, Marshall and Tall looking serious while Bravo confused. Bravo leans towards his coworker.

“What do we do here?”

Tall turns to Bravo, astonished.

“What do you mean ‘What do we do’?! We apprehend him, of course! He’s breaking and entering in the place it’s our job to watch!”

“Right.”

The pair start to look toward the invader again.

“Then let’s do our jo—”

The crook flicks a lighter and brings the flame up to a cheap smoke bomb from a firework shop. There’s some struggle to get it lit, but when he does, he throws it at the ground and pushes past the guards. A frankly inoffensive amount of smoke emits from the bomb, barely filling the guards’ noses, who are standing still and bewildered. His frantic footsteps become increasingly distant as he escapes down the hall. The two look at each other.

Marshall jumps into Agnes’ driver’s seat and tosses his backpack on the passenger’s side in the same motion. They peel off into the early morning light. Marshall sips his coffee with a big, satisfied grin and thinks he can’t remember the last time he felt this excited. He’s so excited, in fact, that he doesn’t notice the hearse in the rearview mirror.