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## Letter from Montana

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## LETTER FROM MONTANA

YOU RETURN TO A PLACE where you once lived, but your street is gone, the buildings razed, the rubble carried away, the land reclaimed by grasses and shrubs. Only the street sign remains, rusted to near-unintelligibility, bent at the waist as if struck by a car.

Your new apartment is near a firing range. Long into the night, the sound of gunfire keeps you from sleep. Then, at daybreak, you're awakened by the smack of the newspaper against your door. Reading it, you discover an error on the front page: the article that accompanies a photo of a little girl who played the violin in a national competition contains only one sentence, printed over and over: "Julia, how could you do this to me? Julia, how could you do this to me?"

A bartender in a bar you used to visit greets you by name when you order a drink. You chat for a few minutes about what you've been doing for the last few years. "Wait a minute," says the bartender, "what did you say you did for a living?" You tell her. "Sorry," she says, "I think I thought you were somebody else."

"With the same name?"

"With the same name."

You climb a local mountain famous for the giant balancing rock that sits on the summit. As you always used to, you pack water and sandwiches, for the mountain is very tall. You hike all day long, encountering two snakes, several interesting birds, and countless squirrels and insects. You're tired, but filled with a sense of impending epiphany. When you at last reach the summit, the rock is there, and it is as you remember. But there is no epiphany. The rock is beautiful, but coldly so. You feel too tired to hike back down. When at last you do, you go to bed immediately, though it is only six o'clock.

While bicycling through town, you find your old street. It has been moved, buildings and all. Even the cars parked on the street are the same. Or maybe you just forgot where it was.

The old man in the house across from you sits in a third-story window all day, hunched over an orange telephone, as if waiting for it to ring. You get the idea that you should call him, so you read his name on the mailbox, then look him up in the book. You call. The phone rings for a long time – you hear it in your earpiece, and through the window as well, coming from across the street. At last he picks up. “Hello?” he says clearly. But you haven’t thought past this moment. You panic, and hang up.

Each night the gunfire seems to be coming closer. Shouldn’t the firing range be closed at night? Aren’t there zoning laws? You want to call in the morning, but the firing range isn’t listed in the phone book, and you can’t find it on foot, either.

You keep losing your keys, but then there they are in your pocket, the first place you looked.

Through binoculars, you can see hikers move along the hillside. As you watch, one of them appears to be mauled by a bear. Startled, you put down your binoculars. When you again raise them to your eyes, you can’t find the hiker. Nothing about the incident appears in the paper.

Outside your office, your bicycle is stolen. But while you are inside, calling the police, the bike is mysteriously returned. You soon realize that this is happening every day – someone is picking your lock, borrowing your bike, and returning it half an hour later. After a week of trying to catch the thief in the act, you give up.

You dream you’re having lunch with a colleague, and the colleague berates and humiliates you for something you have said. The next day, over lunch, you tell your colleague about the dream, and he says, “What are you, some kind of sick pervert?”

Dogs avoid you on the street. But then, they always have.

One night something breaks your window and strikes the wall above your bed. You turn on the light. There is a small hole there in the plaster, the size of a bullet.

One Sunday, you notice that everyone in town seems to be walking or driving in the same direction. They are animated, colorfully dressed. They ignore you as you pass them. All around, stores and restaurants are closed. Soon the entire town seems to be empty, and the noise of a distant crowd echoes against the hills. At home, you turn on the radio to find out what's happening. It is a football game.

You have been here for months, and have made no friends. You're out of money and your presence feels increasingly gratuitous at the office. You decide that it is at last time to leave. You pack your car and return to the town you came here from. But it isn't the same.