Near Lake Erie

Baird Harper

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Francis Varsho took leave from opening his birthday presents to calm himself in private. Almost all gifts people gave him these days insulted Francis deeply, as though, through the act of generosity, they were trying to undermine his sense of self. The latest offender—on this, his twelfth birthday—was his grandmother, whom he’d not seen in over a year and who hadn’t bothered to show up for his birthday dinner of square pizza and two kinds of root beer. The gifts, a pair of pajamas covered with space ships and a lame Star Hunter action figure which Francis already had plans to behead, came to him through the mail from her home in Lansing. He remembered his grandmother as a woman with orange hair and tinted eyeglasses, too virile-looking to play a convincing grandparent. He knew very little about her life otherwise, except that she’d recently lost her cat, Barnaby, to an electrocution.

“My blood isn’t coagulating right,” Francis said.

His mother was already eating one of the store-bought cupcakes. A crown of vanilla frosting sprouted like a white thorn from her upper lip.

He wondered if he’d used ‘coagulate’ properly. It was a word Dr. Gillson said often, and he figured his mother recognized that much. When frustrated, Francis believed he could feel the blood thinning, like a slackening around his heart, a faint buoyancy under the skin of his hands.

“I’ll just need a moment to myself,“ he added.

At the bathroom mirror, Francis took deep breaths and massaged his scalp the way he’d seen the yoga lady do it on public access channel nineteen. He was moving his fingertips in swirls rearward from his temples, through the mess of thick brown hair, when he came across a dime-sized lump on the back of his head. It felt gummy and coarse at the same time, warm to the touch, like a dog’s nose when dry.

He returned to the living room, still fingerling the unknown bump beneath his hair. “What have you been telling grandmother about me?”
On the television, women in bathing suits ate cockroaches.

“I told her you were into sci-fi,” his mother said.

“It’s not really that simple,” said Francis.

“I think that stuff is really cool.” She emphasized the last word in a way that convinced Francis she was too old to be using it.

“You can’t just say ‘sci-fi,’” said Francis. “People don’t get it. They send me action figures.”

His mother turned from the television. “At least she sent you something.”

This, Francis understood, was a direct cut at his father, whose gift had apparently been delayed by the post office. There were rumors of a billboard along the highway somewhere with his father’s face on it. He sold real estate in a place south of Detroit, near Lake Erie, and if he was doing as well as Francis had heard, this year’s gift would be better than ever before.

When his mother went outside for a cigarette, Francis snuck a short knife from the forbidden drawer in the kitchen, taking an older, duller blade, figuring she wouldn’t notice it missing. He hauled the presents upstairs, climbed onto his bed, and folded his legs into lotus position. He’d been training to be an ancient guild ninja in a new-school sort of way, without the guild, or the mentor, or any formal training whatsoever. He’d taught himself difficult things before—how to record on the VCR, how to tie a hangman’s noose—and lately he believed that, with enough intense concentration, he could will himself into martial arts expertise.

Francis liked science-fiction because of the promises it made about the way things might turn out. He read and watched every bit he could find, from the Cold War classics to the newest, most experimental stuff at the margins of the cable TV universe. He loved it all, as long as it didn’t show up on lunch boxes or become some fad all the kids at school were into. Two Christmases ago, his father had given him a subscription to Other Worlds, a science-fiction monthly so obscure and fledgling that it failed to go to press some months. Dear Subscriber, We regret to inform you that due to budget shortfalls, OTHER WORLDS will not be publishing an April issue. Francis carried the little postcard with him everywhere, like a secret badge of honor.

After a while, he unfolded his legs, rolled off the bed, and demonstrated several advanced attacks, calling them out as he performed them—roundhouse! eye gouge! side kick! neck chop!—envisioning, as he flailed, his grandmother. The tinted glasses, the crumbs of make-up in her wrinkles, her blue-veined hands like faded roadmaps. He could see her wandering the aisles of K-Mart, the dead cat Barnaby under her arm, asking where the “sci-fi toys” are located.
When he'd sufficiently exhausted his repertoire of maneuvers, he calmed his blood with more meditation. He then took out the knife and muscled the dull blade through the neck of the action figure.

“Francis?” His mother appeared in the doorway, a creamy white mustache of bleach on her upper lip, and her hair wound into hot-pink curlers that made clicking sounds as they cooled. “Do you know why my hand mirror smells?”

He tucked the knife into the fold of belly fat beneath his shirt.

“I’m going out with Mr. Pope tonight so I need to use that mirror, and it smells funny. Do you have any idea why?” She paused for him to offer up a confession.

Francis waited with her, the cool blade warming against his stomach. “Do you want me to buy you your own mirror?” she asked.

He did not want this. He wanted to go on using hers, in secret. For months, he’d been looking for a barcode somewhere on his body, exploring all corners of himself, places he figured most people never dared to survey—the calloused skin between his toes, the sour basins of his armpits, and the cagey, unknowable netherzone beneath his butt crack. His mother would buy him a crappy little plastic mirror that would forever remind him of how weird he knew she knew he was.

“I didn’t use your mirror,” he insisted.

She accepted his denial with a long unconvinced glare, and bumped herself upright with a push of her hip off the doorjamb. “Whatever,” she said. “I guess I’ll go wash my mirror now.”

Francis’s face felt hot. His chest sloshed with loose blood. He extracted the knife from the fold of fatty skin and checked that there were no cuts. His heart pumped too fast now, and because his blood didn’t clot properly, he knew he could no longer risk even a small wound.

Though he'd thought about doing it for a long time, the discovery of the mole-like lump at the back of his scalp finalized Francis’s decision to shave his head. His mother loved the heavy dark locks on his head, and made constant reference to the fact that girls would eventually be so lucky to date his hair. Mr. Pope, their landlord, had nice hair too, she had said, though his was darker and combed straight back in long oily quills as though he constantly jetted forward. Mitch, the guy she dated before Mr. Pope, had had nice hair as well, and when Francis thought about the two men as a series, it struck him that his mother might have let his father leave them on the grounds of hair quality alone.
He’d studied his father’s bald spot since it was the size of a quarter. The last time he’d seen him, a little over two-and-a-half years ago, the baldness had spread over the whole top of his head. Hair loss seemed to destroy some men, but his father hadn’t cared at all. “Who needs hair anymore, right Frank?” he’d say, glancing his fingers over the shiny scalp. “It’s the wave of the future.”

After watching his mother skip down the front steps into Mr. Pope’s giant black car, Francis went to her bathroom, taped a blue towel over the window, pulled the nightlight out of the socket, and lit his mother’s vanilla candles on the sink. He fished the beard trimmer—the one she’d bought but never gave to his father—out of the shoebox in her closet. Still in mint condition, the device looked pitiful in the way outmoded things always do. It clicked on and hummed an eerie tickle through the bones in his arm.

“Wave of the future,” he said, and ran the trimmer through the part in his hair.

In the morning, his mother slept in, so Francis got to school late on his piece-of-crap ten-speed. His nemesis, Foster Brown, sat behind him in first period math poking at the gummy mass on the back of his head, whisper-chanting, “Ham-burger, Ham-burger.” Except for its size, the mole-lump did look like a hamburger patty—a circular flat brown glob with a chewy surface to it. Even the charitable kids, in whose merciful logic Francis could occasionally take refuge, solemnly agreed.

By recess, everyone was calling him ‘Hamburger.’

“Turn around, so I can smell it,” Foster Brown demanded. Foster had a turned-up nose and a scar-gap in his eyebrow from where he’d once taken a hockey puck to the face. He laid his hand on Francis’s newly-shaved dome and tried to turn him as if unscrewing a jar. As Francis spun away, Foster sniffed him and announced to the gathering recess crowd, “It smells like a Big Mac!”

Atop the monkey bars, at the far end of the recess world, Francis could escape. The row of steel piping reminded him of something he’d read in Other Worlds. In the story there’d been a catwalk suspended above a laboratory where people were put into pods and implanted with special skills like jujitsu and nuclear core repair. It had been a great story, serialized, coming to him in three out of five installments. The subscription ran out before he received parts four and five, and his father, who, by then, had gone to live near Lake Erie, wasn’t around to renew it. Francis had been surprised when his mother noticed that he was not getting “that magazine” anymore. She winked at him.
when she remarked at this, as if she were going to take care of it, but when Christmas came around, he got a commemorative *Star Wars* placemat and a red cable-knit sweater.

He rubbed his bare head, feeling the cat-tongue coarseness of the fresh-cut stubble, then the little lump in back. It was, he decided, the type of birthmark which signified the sort of rare destiny bestowed only upon certain young tortured heroes-in-waiting. A new kind of barcode, something more advanced than simple lines and numbers, something the current human technology wouldn't yet understand.

"Hey Hamburger!" Foster Brown's voice approached from behind. "I saw your dad last weekend."

Francis swiveled atop the monkey bars to find the brute staring up at him. In the distance, Foster's henchmen threw asphalt chunks at the fat girls.

"He's on a billboard," Foster said. "Looks like you, only not as ugly." He grabbed his crotch, yanking a wad of his jeans into a mound.

Francis let his lids fall closed. No one ever fought him on account of his disorder, but he figured if he could dismount the monkey bars fast enough and sweep-kick Foster Brown's nuts off the front of his body, the question of retaliation would become irrelevant. He opened his eyes, winked, then leapt down onto his nemesis.

Foster braced himself, deflecting the attack with a hard shoulder.

Francis landed in the woodchips. He knew the duel had already ended, and that upon failing with his initial attack, Foster wouldn't be baited further. He checked his hands and elbows for cuts. As he looked up, Foster pounced on him, a sweaty palm clutching at Francis's throat and then a dull weight smashing his nose. The whole front of his face burst open. His head recoiled from the blow and floated backwards until woodchips poked into his naked skull.

Foster hovered for a moment. His hulkish figure jutted sideways into the sky, then vanished.

As Francis sat up, blood painted two red fangs down the front of his shirt. In the distance, kids played on, oblivious. He ran behind the equipment shed at the edge of the playground, the shriek and laughter of games going on everywhere like taunting voices in his head. He exhaled through his nose and sprayed a red mist over his knees. He tried to stuff the collar of his shirt up his nostrils. The end-of-recess bell rang. A final burst of noise rippled across the playground, and then the din began to move off toward the building. He felt himself growing heavy against the wall of the
shed, shrinking into the unmowed grass. The sky spun on a strange axis. Drowsiness gnawed at the edges of his thoughts.

Francis awoke on a hospital gurney. A woman wore a pink smock. A tall man with little mole eyes appeared from behind a curtain.

“If you’re looking for the barcode,” said Francis, “it’s on my head.”

They wheeled him into a different room of the hospital. A woman’s voice sounding like his mother’s talked into a phone on the other side of the door. Tubes ran up his nose and into the vein-purple crook in his arm. Machines clicked and whirred all around, marking the moments like clocks counting a new strain of time. A bag of clear syrup and a bag of blood hung from nearby dollies.

He wondered how much time had passed.

The voice in the hallway grew louder and he could see though the crack in the door that his mother looked ancient. Her eyes were crow-footed. Loose jowls shivered in her neck. Had he been frozen? The body aches suggested he’d been operated on extensively, perhaps made into some kind of cyborg. He brought his hand to his ear, opened and closed the fist, listening for the toil of gears beneath the skin.

The door swung open. The old woman stepped in, said, “Yes, uh huh, okay, bye,” into her cell phone, then clicked it off. “Francis, you’re awake,” she said. “Do you remember me?”

“What year is it?” He’d always wanted to say this, and it felt only slightly less exciting than he’d hoped.

The old woman laughed, and a tiny bone-colored hand curled over her mouth, and Francis realized his mother wasn’t there at all. A doctor in a wavy lab coat breezed into the room. “The monster awakes!” The doctor smelled of Italian food and he tasted the corners of his mouth as he read a chart. “Looks like we finally stopped you up,” he said.

The old woman pulled a pair of tinted eyeglasses from her purse and leaned over the doctor’s shoulder.

“What have you turned me into?” The dryness of his throat made Francis’s voice sound grave. He opened and closed his fist again, sure now that he could hear the gears. Francis swallowed hard to show that it wasn’t easy to wake up as a machine, but his eyes bore straight ahead to advertise a manly resolve to harness the gifts that his new condition would surely bring.

The doctor turned away. “So, you’re the boy’s...”

“Grandmother,” the old woman said. “His mother couldn’t make it, so I came to get him.”

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Francis caught bits of the doctor’s report: some bruising around the nose and eyes, significant blood loss, IVs, platelets, blood coagulants, not so big a deal if it had been someone else.

On the way home, the dream began to break apart. The future slipped away. None of the cars on the highway looked ultramodern. A rusted-out beater dragged its sparking muffler ahead of them. Jumbo jets blinked drowsily in the night sky. Francis called his grandmother “future mom,” until she told him that people don’t go crazy unless they fall on their head.

At home, everything was exactly as he’d remembered—the same fruit in the basket next to the toaster, the same soggy pizza crusts in the sink’s drain catch. His mother reclined on the couch watching Wheel of Fortune.

“Where’s your hair?” she exclaimed, rolling herself off the couch.

“How come you weren’t at the hospital?” he asked.

“Oh honey, you know I can’t stand hospitals.” This was true. She hadn’t visited Francis’s father when he’d had hernia surgery years ago. Francis remembered him citing this fact while yelling at her in the kitchen a few weeks before he left and didn’t come back.

“Besides.” She stopped a few paces short to get a look at Francis. “Your Grammy was there to watch over you.”

Francis received a cued smile from the old woman who looked nothing like a “Grammy.” He resolved to find out her real name and call her by it.

“But I was bleeding,” he said.

His mother finally moved close enough to hug him. “Francis, where did all your hair go?” She gripped his shoulders, pushing him to arm’s length. “Did they shave it off at the hospital?”

He ran his hand over the top of his head. “I like it.”

“That’s why I hate hospitals.” She pivoted her gaze momentarily to the television and then back to Francis. “Oh, honey, you had such beautiful hair!”

“It’s the wave of the future,” he said.

His grandmother huffed. “Oh yes. Get this. He’s been calling me ‘future mom,’ all the way home.”

“He reads too much sci-fi.” His mother pulled him into her arms again. “Oh Frank, your poor hair!”

When his mother had company over—and his grandmother felt like company—Francis snuck up into the attic, a cramped little storage space with thousands of nails coming through the slanted walls and the floor
awash with the half-discarded junk of the last five tenants. Their own boxes of photo albums, baby clothes, and holiday decorations had been tossed up so haphazardly by his mother’s old boyfriend Mitch that much of the contents had spilled out and mixed with the things left behind by previous renters. The resulting jumble reminded Francis of a post-apocalyptic setting. He felt a strange joy at trudging through the swamp of trash and memories, pausing here and there to examine a picture of a family he didn’t know or a plastic baby’s rattle which might have been his way back before the great disaster. He felt like a survivor, a man turned archaeologist, sifting through the ruins of a leveled civilization.

Under a broken stroller, Francis kept a pile of his old school papers and a book of poems his second-grade teacher had bound into a collection. On page sixteen was his own poem about a trip his parents had taken him on to Mackinac Island. There’d been a boardwalk full of seafood restaurants and carnival booths and a fortune teller who told Francis she saw visions of him as an astronaut. Beside the poem, he’d drawn three smiling people labeled “Me,” “Mom,” and “Dad.” Looking at it now, though, the picture seemed ridiculous and deceitful. He could already see the lousy future: the kid who lived there next would wander up into the attic, see that drawing, and think Francis’s father still had all that hair.

His nose began to throb, a pulsing warmth at the center of his face, like the blood trying to get out again. He took a magic marker from the floor and wrote onto the margin of page sixteen: If anyone finds this poem, it was written by Francis T. Varsho, a boy the asswipes at school called Hamburger. Don’t believe any of the happy drawings or the cute little baby clothes. I became bald as an eagle with blood so thin I was barely ever alive.

Though he felt well enough on Friday morning, Francis lobbied against returning to school until after the weekend. His mother consented on the condition that he stay at the house with Grammy for a few days while she drove up to Windsor to gamble with Mr. Pope.

Francis hated these negotiations. He wanted to tell her that he hated them, but instead he avoided her all morning, hoping she’d sense his displeasure and withdraw her request. At lunch, his mother suggested there was still time to drop him off at school for the second half of his classes.

“What’s Grammy’s name?” he asked, wrapping two leaves of bologna around a wand of string cheese.

“Edna,” his mother said.
“Edna what?”
“Edna Traylor,” she said. “Don’t you know what my maiden name was?”
“Her name is Edna Traylor?”
“Yes,” his mother said. “Why do you need to know?”
“Okay,” said Francis. “You can go to Windsor.”
Mr. Pope’s black Cadillac appeared in the driveway an hour later. Francis’s grandmother folded a twenty dollar bill and stuffed it into his mother’s blouse.
“Put twenty on black for me.” The old woman looked out the window at Mr. Pope’s car gleaming in the afternoon sun. “Now go get lucky.”

Dinner was spinach lasagna from one of the cookbooks his mother never used. His grandmother chewed slowly with closed eyes as if her teeth were crumbling. He wondered if she was thinking about her electrocuted cat, Barnaby. Francis wanted to ask her about it. He wanted also to address the old woman with her real name to see if it bothered her, but the lasagna tasted good and he instead concentrated on appreciating it.
“This is really good.” He scooped an extra-large bite into his mouth and chewed it with a smile to show his sincerity.

His grandmother winced. “You look like your father,” she said. “It must make your mom miserable to see his face all the time.”
“Do you think he knows I was in the hospital?” Francis asked.
She rose from the table to cover the remaining lasagna with foil. “You were only there for half a day.”
“Maybe we should go visit him. Mom said it’s only a three-hour drive.”
His grandmother wiped down the counters, the stovetop, the tile behind the sink. “Really,” she said, “it must make her miserable.”

Francis finished and excused himself. In his mother’s bathroom he found the vanilla candles, a canister of shaving cream, and one of the plastic blue razors left behind by somebody. He ran the sink full of hot water and dipped his head in as deep as he could. The hot wet beads tingled as they ran lines down his face and neck. The collar of his T-shirt darkened. Once he’d molded a thick coif of shaving cream over his whole scalp, he drew the razor slowly through the bristled fuzz.

A knock came at the door, and in the mirror he could see the brass knob jiggle against the lock. “Francis, are you in there?” his grandmother asked. “I smell burning. Is something on fire?”
“No, Edna,” he said. “Nothing’s on fire.”
The doorknob quit jiggling, but he could still hear the old woman’s breath on the other side of the door. “Excuse me?”

“I’m fine,” he said.

“Did you call me Edna?”

He dragged another strip of foam off his head and slung the dollop into the sink.

“What did you say, Francis?”

“I said, ‘it’s the wave of the future!'” he yelled.

Edna’s footsteps creaked slowly away.

When Francis finished shaving, he rinsed off the excess foam and rubbed lotion into his head. The shine was glorious. In the TV room, he sat down across the couch from Edna, who stared at him but said nothing about the clean shave. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her head pivot every few seconds. She huffed, opened her mouth, but then didn’t speak. He began to enjoy how completely distracted she’d become.

“You’re bleeding,” she finally said.

He turned to her, thinking he hadn’t heard correctly.

“That mole thing on your head is bleeding down the back of your neck.” She dabbed her forefinger against his head and showed him the red smudge.

In the bathroom he washed the cut, jammed it with Kleenex fibers. He returned to the couch, announcing that he was fine, but the cut continued to bleed, and he could feel the cool channel trickling down the back of his neck. He applied pressure to staunch it, but his arm grew tired and his thumb ached, and soon, Francis had to lie in Edna’s lap while she kept pressure on the wound for him. She changed tissues during the commercial breaks, remarking each time that he was “quite a leaker.” Her constant thumb against his skull gave Francis a headache and he began to grow dizzy. As the chills ran through his torso and a fierce agitation swelled behind his eyes, he began, in spite of his most vehement resistance, to cry.

He couldn’t bear passing out again only to wake up in the same lousy era where science was still just fiction, where schools were overrun with Foster Browns, and snail-paced cars took three hours to get anywhere important.

His grandmother came into his bedroom the next morning. She lifted the bandage off the back of his head and said, “Looks better. Can you travel?”

He nodded and soon they were hauling through the morning light in Edna’s maroon Buick. She let him control the radio, and he respected the privilege by keeping away from the hard rock stations, eventually locating a relaxing new-
age channel toward the end of the FM dial. It had overlapping synthesized tones, heartbeat bass lines, and a woman's voice crooning a soothing, wordless lament.

By late morning they approached Lansing. "I need to stop at my house," Edna announced, and soon they pulled off the highway into a cruddy part of town where all the houses looked small brick forts. Edna stopped at one with a rusted awning and a white porcelain cat in the window. The inside was exactly the kind of place in which he imagined old people lived out their days. The television had a turn-knob.

"Is this black and white?" He took a swipe of dust off the screen.

"Sometimes." She picked up a green porcelain lamp, drew its electric cord slowly through her closed palm, wincing as a melted segment of the wire stopped inside her fist. "Bring that shade."

Francis found the lampshade in the corner beside a scratching post and followed her out the back door into the alley where she dropped the lamp into a garbage can. He handed her the shade and she jammed it down on top, the porcelain breaking up beneath her hands.

"I've been meaning to do that," she said, giving the lampshade a final shove.

Lansing drifted off behind them. A thin haze filled the world as they crossed an open land of unplanted fields on one side and an empty limestone quarry on the other.

"Are we going to see my Dad?" Francis asked.

Edna stared down the highway. Finally, she nodded, and then said she'd heard of a good restaurant from a friend. It would be a bit of a drive, she added, but Francis didn't complain because he was getting what he wanted.

They lost their way trying to get to the restaurant and had to ask for directions, but when they found the place it was about as good as promised. They got refills of their cokes and let themselves digest for awhile before getting back on the road.

Toward Detroit, the new-age signal finally gave itself up to static. Empty factories drew in along the sides of the highway, tree limbs reaching out through the broken windows. Boxcars sat rusting on deserted rails. Derelict machinery hunched everywhere like massive insect husks. Choking plots of grassland bloomed with roadside garbage.

Edna cleared her throat. "Why don't you tell me about one of the stories your mother says you're always reading."

Francis looked out over the landscape and described for her one that
he’d lately been revisiting from an early issue of *Other Worlds* called “After the Apocalypse.” In the story there’d been a nuclear war, and afterward, the survivors were left with a world which looked, he thought, a lot like that tract of bruised earth through which they drove.

“Some visions of the future promise less than others,” Edna agreed.

A sign announced where highways divided—one into Detroit, the other south toward Toledo. Francis asked again if they were really going to see his father.

His grandmother shook her head. “Do you want to?” Her eyes read the distance through her tinted glasses, her wrinkled yellow hands shuffling on the steering wheel like chicken feet.

“Did you call to tell him that we’re coming?” Francis asked.

Edna’s foot pulled off the accelerator, and the car whinnied as it crossed the rumble strip and plowed to a stop on the shoulder. Cars blew past carrying little storms of wind that shivered the Buick. “I heard about this thing,” she said.

Francis turned his gaze ahead to a bright billboard rising from the salt-stained grass at the side of the road. A picture of a family—husband, wife, and baby—advertising something. Red block lettering exclaimed, LET VARSHO REALTY PUT YOU IN THE HOME OF YOUR DREAMS.

The husband on the billboard looked a little like his father, except that he had a full head of hair, a thick brown wave of it like a stain of youth on the otherwise middle-aged man. This man on the billboard—it did sort of look like his father—had an arm wrapped around the wife, who was much younger than the husband, with soft dark eyes and pouty, dangerous lips. A swaddled blue-eyed child stared out from her arms. Francis looked for a while longer, concentrating mostly on the unexplained surge of hair which clung to the once-proud scalp of the father who, he was willing to admit, did look a good deal like his own father.

When Francis’s eyes had had enough of the billboard, Edna put the Buick in gear. She waited for a pair of cars to whip past, then gunned the motor, flopping back onto the interstate. They continued south for a while, but then she pulled off the highway again onto a lonely road full of forsaken strip malls and connected housing. Edna stopped the Buick in front of a complex of homes all with the same kind of windows in the same places and only the front doors painted different.

“I thought we were going to my Dad’s,” said Francis.

Edna left him in the car. She knocked on the nearest house’s door and
a gray-haired man opened up. A dirty smock hung from his neck and he wore a circular doctor’s mirror on his forehead. Edna followed him inside. After a time, she reappeared, looking concerned with the chill in the air. She lowered herself carefully back into the driver’s seat and drew open her cardigan. A gray kitten the size of a gerbil slumped like a damp hand towel over her forearm.

“He’s mine.” Edna handed him the kitten. “But you can hold him while I drive.”

“Are we still going to see my Dad?”

“It’s too late now,” she said.

“But we’re close.” He wasn’t sure of this, but once he’d rifled through the glove compartment in search of a map and found none, he realized she already had them going toward home again.

“What should we name him?” Edna drew her hand back from petting the kitten, put it on the wheel, and revved up the highway ramp.

As they gained speed, Francis turned to get a look at a billboard advertising to the opposite side of the highway. It wasn’t the one. Another billboard approached, but it was for a casino, and then another for a Holiday Inn. As he waited for the next, he wondered if he’d somehow missed the one he’d been looking for, or if perhaps it lay much farther ahead than he remembered. Francis settled into his seat, unsure if he even really wanted to get another look at it.

He turned the static on low volume in anticipation of the new-age music returning, and thought about the story he’d been describing earlier—the leveled cities, the evaporated populations, the diseased and wounded survivors left to ponder whether their luck had been especially good or uniquely terrible. It wasn’t the kind of science-fiction he usually read. He preferred the stories where the future had more clearly lifted off from the present. But as he eyed the world which passed by his window, the salt-strangled grasses growing up through the bits of collision debris and fast food trash, this was the story that came to mind.