

MEG TOTH

FALLOUT

TODAY WE'RE at a double-wide two-bedroom outside Ramona, about forty minutes from my place in east San Diego. It's a typical job—foreclosure on a hoarder's home. The lenders need it cleared so they can assess the damage, see what's salvageable.

There are only a few houses out this way, and as soon as I turn onto the street—I *shit you not*, Mike had texted, *it's called Pile Rd.*—I spot the house. The lawn is covered with junk. Rusted out cars, shelves stacked with dishware, ancient printers and computer monitors, suitcases, tricycles, lamps, a detached stove. It looks like the world's saddest yard sale.

I'm a half hour early, but Mike's already there, coordinating the dumpsters.

"Ben!" He waves me over when he sees my pickup. I wave back through the windshield, but I don't get out until I put my **FALLOUT** shirt on. Mike's a stickler about these things. The last dumpster's coming off the truck bed when I join him.

"Listen," Mike says, "I need you on lead man today. Derrick's out."

That's the third time Derrick's missed in two weeks, and I see something in Mike's eyes. Not anger—worry. He pulls a packet of nicotine gum out of his pocket and pushes a piece through the foil.

"Derrick OK?" I ask. I don't need to respond to the part about being lead man. He knows I'll do it.

He pops the gum in this mouth and chews around his next words. "Something urgent about his grandma."

He says it like he believes it, but I know what we're both thinking. Eight months ago, Derrick did a residential rehab program Mike paid for. He's seemed good since, but he's relapsed before.

"Anyway," he says, "we'll start out here, but why don't you get a lay of the land first? One bedroom's been walled off since"—he checks his notes from last week's site visit—"around 2002."

You can barely walk inside. Two narrow paths lead from the front door, one to the kitchen and the other to the rest of the house, including the walled-off room and the bedroom where the tenant, a woman in her sixties, was clearly doing all her living. Sure as hell wasn't happening in the living room, which is stacked so high with piles—books, clothing,

laundry baskets, boxes—that you can only get a few steps in. Cockroaches skitter over everything, not even bothering to hide when I come close. I pull on my gloves and mask to inspect the outer layer of the blocked room, then step back outside.

By midday, we've gotten the yard under control and it's time to head indoors. Since I'm lead, I choose to begin with the walled-off room. Best to see what we're working with. I start on the barricade, tossing items into trash bags and containers that we hand back down a line that feeds right into the dumpsters. Clothes. Shoes. Rugs. Cardboard trays of jewelry. The bigger things—folding chairs, boxes, plastic tubs filled with everything from tangled extension cords and batteries to Christmas decorations and snow globes—just goes down the line. Layer after accumulated layer I go, and, soon enough, I'm in the room.

I'm in a zone where no one can touch me, and less than an hour later, I make it to the back corner with the windows. The others break for coffee and smokes, but I keep going. I've reached what we call the bed-rock—the original state of the room before it became a landing place. Even before I'm all the way there, I can tell it was a child's bedroom. There's a bed with a Batman bedspread, a bookcase full of action figurines and a few Harry Potters.

Next to the bed sits a cardboard box of comics, and even though I know better—I *fucking know better*—I can't help taking a look. It's the kind of stuff I spent whole weekends dissecting in middle school with my best friend Chris. X-Men, Avengers. Despite myself, I crouch closer, lifting one magazine after another, each cover bringing back a different memory. About me. About Chris.

I'm six deep—*Peter Parker, the Spectacular Spider-Man*—when a throng of beetles erupts from the bottom of the box, swarming up and spilling over the sides. Startled, I scramble backwards and kick the box away; it topples on its side, magazines cascading across the floor. As the beetles disperse, disappearing into unseen crevices, I work to regain my composure. Then, just when everything has gone still and my heart has slowed to its regular rhythm, I feel a slow creep of horror rise again when I see, peeking out from the box, something that's been under the comics for god knows how long: a desiccated rabbit, coiled into a pucker of grief.

WHEN I FIRST saw the job ad, I thought it must be a joke. A business called FALLOUT that specialized in cleaning up messes? But I looked

it up online, and it was legitimate. I was surprised by how many reviews there were, how many people needed such a service.

FALLOUT is the best! I had a tenant commit suicide in his unit, and they didn't discover the body for a week. Don't want to get TMI, but you can imagine. Mike and his guys did a great job and dealt with nosy tenants so I didn't have to. Not cheap, but a fair price for what you're getting.

Now that I've been at FALLOUT going on six years, I get it. Mike says he chose the company's name for its association with the bomb, and it's true that we're certified to clean up toxic materials. But it fits in other, more poetic, ways. You could say we permit things to fall out of our clients' memories. They're grateful for, are *paying* for, ignorance. It's not just that they won't or can't do the work—they want it erased entirely from their consciousness. As if it never happened. And of course when we get a jumper or a recreational leap gone wrong, there's a dark literalism to the name.

But FALLOUT's just my job. My real work—my vocation, my obsession, my labor of love-hate—is my film notebook. I'm not so stupid that I don't see the connection to FALLOUT, though. Both are part of a long reckoning, only I get paid for what I do at FALLOUT.

Paid to excavate and erase what doesn't belong. Paid to restore a semblance of order. Paid to atone.

Sometimes I think of my life as a big container with others stacked inside it, like one of those wooden Russian dolls they sell at Christmas.

Chris—the smallest—inside

Niagara Falls, inside

Mateo, inside

my film notebook, inside

my job at FALLOUT, the outer shell

If only I could get down to the innermost container—the essential, most vulnerable one—I'd be OK. I might not even need to go all the way down, just dig through and find the ones contaminating the others. Toss them right into a hazmat dumpster, and then I'd be whole again.

MY FILM NOTEBOOK

THE WHOLE WAY back from Ramona I keep seeing the rabbit—featherweight, ghastly—so as soon as I'm home, I work on my film notebook to steady myself. I rewatch *Free Solo*, which I'm pretty sure will break into the top ten. That would make two movies in one year, and both mountain-climbing documentaries. What are the odds?

When the credits are done, I get another Corona from the fridge. Back when Mateo was coming around, I always had limes on hand because he liked them in his beer. Didn't even have to be a Corona. He'd push a wedge or two down through the neck of the bottle, and I'd have a hell of a time getting them out for recycling day. At first I bought limes by the bag from the Vons up on Lake Murray Boulevard, but then I planted a tree in a pot out back. Now I don't need the limes any more, and the tree's outgrowing its container. Pretty soon I'll have to decide whether to replant it or let it go.

What I couldn't get across was that it isn't some kind of favorites ranking. It's a list birthed out of anger, not affection. A fist clenched so tightly, and for so long, around a single grain of sand that a wild pearl appears.

I classify the movies based on what you might call "Emulation Risk." How likely, I want to know, are viewers to imitate what they see on screen? I've got a whole system. It's complicated, and it takes time.

I'm too distracted for it now. So I set the empty bottle on the floor, stretch out my legs, and close my eyes. I don't bother turning off the lights.

That night, I dream of Niagara Falls and Mateo—or was it Chris?—and rescue dogs with wooden barrels around their necks.

MATEO

I MET MATEO in the Blockbuster on Fletcher Parkway, where he worked before it closed and got turned into a dentist's office. There was one on University that was more convenient, but it was always picked over, and the long lines made me restless. I was deep into my film notebook then and always felt like I'd run out of time before I could finish perfecting my top ten.

I'd get a handful of DVDs and keep them for weeks at a time, and when I'd finally come in, Mateo would joke about how my late fees were keeping the franchise afloat. He wasn't like the other guys who worked there, who were skinny, twitchy, too young. He was older, sure. But he also had a dignified presence. And he knew more about movies than all his co-workers combined.

One Friday when I was standing in the Action & Adventure section, he walked over with a case in his hand.

"Have you seen this?"

Touch of Evil. The cover was black and white, with a fat man's face looming behind a couple embracing on a bed. It looked seedy. Before I could respond, Mateo held it out.

"You should take this."

I'd already chosen several movies and had a lot of work ahead of me.

"Nah, I've got my hands full here." I held up the DVDs. I didn't want to seem rude, so I smiled. "And I'll have to pay off my debt so I can get these."

"No charge. This is a personal copy."

He was still holding out the DVD, so I took it and placed it with the rest.

I was back at the Blockbuster the following Monday, hoping he'd be on shift. I'd watched the movie on Saturday as a break from my film notebook, and for the rest of the weekend, I couldn't concentrate on my ranking. It's not that I liked the movie. It's that I'd been seeking a lifeline, and Mateo had thrown me one.

He was there, and we made a plan to meet for beers at a bar he knew when he got off shift. It was a place in Lemon Grove, dark, and quiet, too. There was a jukebox, but you could hear yourself think. We sat at the bar for a while, making small talk with the bartender, but we took our second beer to a table.

At first it felt awkward, but when we started talking about movies it was like a spell was cast. He told me about how his *tata* made him watch *Touch of Evil* when he was a kid as a sort of lesson about racism. But it backfired—*Touch of Evil* became his favorite movie. He spent his childhood wanting to be Charlton Heston.

"It took me a long time to see how messed up that was," Mateo said.

He looked down at his beer, giving me a chance to study him. There was a stillness to his body, his fingers resting lightly on either side of the bottle. But his face was animated, a dance of thoughts and emotions.

"I'd play this game with my friends where I'd be Heston and they had to be the gangsters—you know, Grandi and his posse. It was like hide and seek, but when I found them they'd have to sit on my front steps, which was supposed to be the jail. And once I got them all there, I'd lecture them about their crimes, calling them spics and wetbacks. My *tata* caught me at it one time, and I got a beating I'll never forget."

He took a long pull on his beer.

"You know," he continued, "it didn't even make sense, because Heston was supposed to be Mexican, too. But he was the 'good kind.' It was really messed up. Anyway."

I could see he was embarrassed, so I reached my hand across the table, casually, but close enough that I could almost touch his fingers.

"I don't know," I said. "Makes some sense to me."

We sat without talking for a minute, but it didn't feel awkward like when we first sat down.

"At least you didn't want to be Orson Welles," I said.

I'd meant it seriously, but as soon as the words were out they sounded flip, and I was afraid I'd offend him. But he smiled widely, and we both started to laugh.

"Yeah, I guess you're right. *That* would have been sick."

I got another round and we kept talking. He told me that *Touch of Evil* had gotten him into old noirs, and he described some of his favorites. As he spoke, his eyes flickered with reverence, as if he were watching the movies at that very moment.

I told him about my film notebook, or tried to, anyway. Mateo had seen nearly all of the films I was ranking, and it was fascinating to hear someone else's thoughts on stuff I knew inside and out. Almost voyeuristic. But I wasn't sure if I was spying on him or if it was the other way around. Or maybe it wasn't spying; maybe it was a met gaze, recognition.

"What about that documentary about the guy who tightroped between the Twin Towers?" Mateo asked.

"Man, that one's the worst," I said. "Or the best. Right now it's in first place. It's hard to explain."

Mateo looked at me carefully, then reached his hand forward, just as I had done earlier. This time, our fingers touched.

"I sort of get it," he said.

I didn't dare let my eyes drop to our hands. I just accepted the precious feel of skin against skin.

As we continued to talk, I gradually became aware of a strange sensation. It was as if we sat together in a lighted dome made of spun glass. I could see the other patrons in the bar, and they could see us, and I could hear the strains of Patsy Cline and Springsteen coming from the jukebox. *Why do I let myself worry? Baby, we were born to run.* But it was all refracted—not unpleasantly, just slightly off. Inside the dome, though, where threads of electric light bounced back and forth between us, there was an alarming clarity.

And that's pretty much the way things stayed the whole time I was with Mateo. It felt like a homecoming, a return to a place I'd forgotten to miss. But it also felt perilous. Eventually, I knew, he'd want something more, something I was too broken to give.

That night back at home, I realized I'd forgotten to ask why he lent me the movie. In the weeks and then months that followed, I came to be grateful for that lapse. The asking would have made it a question, and I knew the answer anyway.

ANOTHER DREAM about Mateo and Niagara Falls. No rescue dogs this time. Instead, we sit on a precipice, Mateo in swim trunks and me in my FALLOUT shirt. We're bent over my film notebook, but the data's blurry, unreadable. I turn the pages faster and faster until finally they become blank.

NIAGARA FALLS

WHEN I WAS a junior in high school, the whole family went to Rochester to visit Grandma's sister in a nursing home, and on the way back, we stopped at Niagara Falls. There were two carfuls of us. My brother, Lee, his wife, Dawn, and their son, Jacob. Me and Mom and Grandma.

It was winter, and the place had an off-season feel. Only a fraction of the parking lot was in use, and most of the souvenir huts were shuttered. An icy mist rose up off the falls. I still have a picture on my fridge of me and Jacob, who was four, standing in front of them. I'm crouched down next to him, huddled in my jacket, and Jacob, wearing a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles ball cap that's too big for his head, has one mittened hand on the railing and the other on my shoulder.

Dawn took the photograph just before it happened. Jacob was whining about being cold, and Grandma was telling Lee—but really Dawn—that he should have made his son wear a proper winter hat. To smooth things over, I offered to take Jacob to the Adventure Theater. They play a movie there about the history of the falls that I'd seen when I visited with my class in middle school.

If I had thought about it for even half a minute, I would have realized that it was a terrible idea. Instead, I told myself that Jacob could warm up while having an experience his uncle had, a sort of legacy thing. And I blocked out any other thought that tried to crowd in.

As we waited for the next screening, Jacob asked for his mom so many times that I almost gave up. But when the lights dimmed and the movie started, I could tell he was into it. I was, too, even though the movie was pretty hokey. Still, I couldn't believe how clearly I remembered the parts about the daredevils, the men and women who went over the falls in barrels and other eccentric devices.

I got so absorbed—not so much with the movie as with memories it dug up—that I didn’t notice Jacob was gone until the lights came on. Panicked and irrational, I stupidly looked under his seat. But in my heart, I knew what had happened. He had loved the parts about jumping over the falls and decided to try it himself.

I could see him climbing through the railing—it would be easy for a four-year-old—and walking out onto the precipice. Losing his balance and falling. His oversized hat left behind, our only clue to his fate.

I raced back to the falls, yelling Jacob’s name and sobbing like a kid, snot running down my nose and into my mouth. I was wild, out of control, and I got worried looks from the few visitors on the causeway. Jogging the length of the railing, I kept my eyes on the crashing pool below, but I didn’t see him. And I didn’t find his hat on the ground where I had so perfectly pictured it.

Turning back to the theater, I saw my family in the distance. They were pretty far off, but I could see Lee holding Jacob and what looked like a big pink blob. By the time I got close enough to make out the cotton candy, my heart had returned to a normal rhythm and my body remembered to feel cold—I’d forgotten my jacket in the theater. I wiped the tears and snot from my face, preparing to get a lecture from Dawn about my poor babysitting. But no one said anything. So I swallowed my shame and retrieved my jacket, and we got back into the car and drove home to Cleveland.

One Thanksgiving years later—Jacob in middle school, me long since moved to California—I told my brother about it. Everyone had gone home, and Dawn and Jacob were in bed. When Lee poured out two generous whiskeys, I said I needed to discuss something with him. I took a sip from my glass, too big, and coughed. Then I just sat there.

By the time I finished the story, Lee was laughing so hard that he couldn’t talk.

“Sorry, man. Really, I’m sorry,” he said once he caught his breath. “It’s just I thought you were going to tell me you had cancer or something.”

“I thought he was dead, Lee. I thought he was dead and it was my fault.”

That sobered him up. I think he suspected the layers underneath that claim, the history. Because hadn’t I already failed once, let another boy die?

He spoke gently. “You didn’t do anything wrong. I think Dawn was worried that Jacob couldn’t sit through the movie and asked me to look in. I remember opening the door and seeing him bouncing around,

probably annoying the hell out of everyone. He noticed me and ran over, and I guess I must've thought you saw. That's it."

I sat there stunned, replaying the memory with this new, preposterous information. I had picked at those seven and a half minutes like a festering scab all those years. For nothing.

Then I started laughing, and Lee did, too—even harder than before—and we sat there together, two grown men, crying.

CHRIS

I DON'T RECALL much about my class trip to the falls except for watching the movie. What I do remember is that when we got back home to Cleveland, Chris couldn't stop talking about the daredevils in the movie. He wanted to be them, especially Bobby Leach, and he knew just the spot to do it.

In the next town over, there was a beach where the rich kids swam. Everyone at school talked about it like it was sacred. Clean sand, clear water—leagues better than our shabby patch of Lake Erie, where, as a toddler, I'd once found a used tampon applicator that I played with until my mom saw and ripped it out of my sandy fist. But most importantly, the rich kids' beach had a zipline where we could reenact what we'd seen in the movie.

On the first day of summer break, we rode our bikes out there, five whole miles, only to discover there was a booth where you had to show a pass to get in. The guard was condescending, and the mannered parents waiting in line looked at us with both pity and apprehension. Humiliated and hot from the long ride, we grew irritable with each other until Chris had the idea to "stick it to the richies." We'd sneak past the gate, then run around pantsing every kid in sight.

But while looking for a way in, we discovered something better.

A quarter mile beyond the gate, where the road climbed steeply before coming to a dead end, there was a plot of overgrown land.

"Let's go!" Chris called back over his shoulder. He'd already set his bike down on the berm and was walking ahead, so I followed him. "Maybe we can climb down to the beach from here."

We waded through a thicket of dense brambles, sharp twigs and thorns scratching our bare legs raw. A swarm of mayflies, disturbed from their slumber, flew into our blinking eyes and cursing mouths. Finally, we emerged into a clearing on the other side. A small field of dried grass and reed husks stretched before us, terminating in a cliff.

The green lake shimmered below, and we could see the rich kids' beach and hear their cries, distant and tinny.

But by then, we'd forgotten about them.

A bluff with a stone overhang dropping into a cove just out of sight of the richies' beach stood before us like a mirage. It was perfect. We could jump from there, pretend it was the falls.

Sitting together with our legs stretched out on the hot stone, Chris tried to figure how far the drop was. He must have made fifteen guesses, finally settling on seventy feet. In retrospect, I see he was just using the time to get up his nerve.

Then he leaned back on his elbows and stared straight ahead when he spoke.

"Rub me for good luck."

"What?" I said. But I already knew what he meant.

He took my hand and placed it on the crotch of his swim trunks. I could feel him getting bigger, and I felt a stirring in my own shorts. He moved my hand up and down a few times, and when he took it away, I kept the rhythm going.

When it was over, he stood up and, without warning, leapt off the rock.

"Bobby Leach forever!" he screamed. I heard the splash and looked over the edge, seeing his head emerge from the water below.

He called up to me to jump, but I was too chicken. After he'd jumped five more times and still I refused, he finally stopped badgering me about it.

This is how the summer went, especially after we cleared a path down to the cove. We'd swim for a while, but eventually we'd go to the overhang. Chris would leap; I wouldn't. And he wouldn't jump without what he called his Niagara luck. It sounds like lunacy, but I really believed I was protecting him, a strange sort of talisman. Part of me still believes it.

One day in August, just a couple weeks before school started, Chris seemed different. We swam and climbed up and sat on our rock, just like always, but there was an edginess to him. Before he could ask, I reached over and slid my fingers under his waistband, but as soon as I began, he stilled my hand with his own.

"Wait. You too."

He reached over and put his hand on top of my trunks, something he'd never done. At first I was surprised, but then my body took over, and I stopped thinking.

Afterward, he pulled me to my feet.

"And now you jump."

He led me to the edge, but I didn't want to do it. I started to go back to the spot I always sat in, but he grabbed my wrist.

"Come on! It'll be fine. You got your Niagara luck. Just make sure you jump out far enough."

"Nah, Chris. It's cool. You go."

"We can go together, then. I'll hold your hand the whole way down. If you wanna be Bobby, I'll be Charles Stephens."

I twisted out of his grasp, maybe too hard, and he looked wounded. Then his expression turned stiff, and I realized the difference I'd sensed in him all day had arrived at its destination.

"I knew you'd be a pussy about it," he said, grabbing me again.

We wrestled, wild, as he inched me closer to the precipice. Finally I pulled away, and Chris lost his footing; he didn't leap over the edge, he fell. He was right there with me, and then he wasn't. His body hit the face of the rock three times as he went down. I know because I counted.

I waited for his head to pop out of the water like it always did, in the dead center of the circles his body created. But the circles just spread out and faded until the surface of the lake was one long piece of green, unbroken glass. I think I called his name, but I can't be sure. What I do remember is feeling a stickiness in my trunks, and I knew I had to get rid of it. As I pounded down our path to the lake below, syllables underscored each panicked step I took. *E-vi-dence. E-vi-dence.*

I went into the water and washed myself hastily, afraid I might see Chris's body float by. And then I climbed back up and ran back through the spiky brambles and down the road to the booth. I didn't bother with my sneakers, and every time my soles hit the pavement, a shock ran up my shins. I don't remember much after that, though sometimes a snatch or two will come to me in unexpected moments.

The ambulance. Mom's face at the station.

Nearly every day since I've wondered what would have happened if I had gone straight to the booth. For years, I was just thinking about Chris. Would he still be alive if I'd acted differently? It took me over two decades to accept that he wouldn't—he would have fractured his skull and drowned no matter what I did. I've finally laid that demon to rest.

Now my speculation takes a different shape. I wonder not about Chris's fate but my own. What if I'd put rescuing my friend first? How would I be different? Would I have granted myself forgiveness, or would

I still be withholding it?



I LEAN FORWARD on the couch, notebook open in my lap while I rewatch *Free Solo*. I go scene by scene, putting notes and tentative numbers into columns. I'm at the part where the director—who's buddies with the subject of the film, the guy who free solos—is talking about what it feels like to know he might film his friend's death when I hear my phone buzz. A group text from Mike, so we must have a new job. I want to finish the scene before getting distracted, so I shut the ringer off and keep going.

When the scene ends, I press pause and open my phone to find out when and where to meet for our next FALLOUT gig. I'm hoping for a hoarder and not something messier. I'm still under the spell of the movie, thinking about all the ways the guy's climb could go wrong. About the aftermath of risk.

There's a string of texts, Mike's at the top.

Derrick OD'd last night. In ICU at Scripps Mercy. Here now with his gramma. Thought you should know.

I stare at the message for a minute, blinking. Then I read the others' texts and Mike's responses. Condolences. Offers made. Offers rejected. My eyes smart as I send my own version, telling Mike I can be there in an hour. But he refuses my help, too.

Don't want to put you out.

I press play on the movie, but ten minutes later I shut off the TV. I'm not taking notes. I'm not thinking about *Free Solo* or anything, really. All I'm doing is gripping the pen so hard that I wonder if I could make it burst. I actually try to do it, closing a fist around it with as much force as I can summon. But I can't.

Before I know what I'm doing, I find my other hand and snap the pen in half. The ink streams out the narrow inner tube, covering my fingers and the notebook. I wait too long to grab the box of tissues, too long to dab at the thickening pool. As I scrub my hands at the sink, I estimate how many pages the ink will bleed through and ruin. At least three, I guess. Which parts of me grieve this, and which parts don't?

I dry my hands and walk out back. It's later than I thought. The crickets are setting up a racket, and the sky is taking on that creamy orange color that reminds me of the push pops I'd eaten back in the summers of my childhood. I haven't been out here for weeks, but the lime

tree is thriving without me. Emerald and burnished, the fruits burst forth from the branches. I pluck one off and cradle it in my cupped palm, still stained with faint ink. It smells bright and sharp, mingling with the soap from my hand.

I inhale deeply and pull my phone out of my pocket. I skim the string of texts from the guys again, think about Mike's affection for Derrick. *The kid*, he calls him, though Derrick turned twenty-five this year. How many times has Derrick broken Mike's heart? How many times is too many times?

I want, with an urgency I haven't felt in ages, to text Mateo, and before I can talk myself out of it, I type out a message and hit send.

It's a long shot. It's going on five months since I last saw him. We fought, and it was ugly. I had seen it coming for a long time. Like Chris, Mateo wanted me to leap with him, take his hand. But I was afraid. He forgave me later, but I shunned him, made out like it was his problem, not mine. I was shameful and shabby.

So, yeah, it's a long shot. But there's a chance, and I've taken it.

Then I type out another message, this one to Mike.

Coming anyway.

I pick more limes, filling a plastic bag I find under the kitchen sink. Maybe Derrick's grandma can use them. I look up the directions to Scripps Mercy while watering the tree.

I put the bag of limes next to my phone on the passenger seat, and as I head up Baltimore Drive, their perfume fills the cab of the pickup. Tart and verdant, the scent of possibility. A carnival of possibility. By the time I hit I-8, I feel almost intoxicated.

I merge onto the highway, heading west into the dying light. The sun rears up one last time, soaking the cab in a crimson glow, and then plummets below the horizon. And in just that instant, when nightfall enshrouds the interior of the truck, my phone lights up.