

for god's sake,      come home

**re.occurrence**

(leo mara)

Across the corn belt grown in Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and Nebraska, travellers go missing.  
More often, it's children that are taken.

What else do we know about the belt?

Well, we know there's a cult hidden in the fields. Undressed individuals, who're maybe not human, wailing at the earth  
and chasing away the occasional passing car. Here, we call whatever they are Naked.

## South Carolina

Raymond pulled up near enough onto the curb. He turned off the engine of his chest-infected car, pulled the keys from its ignition and ignored the vacant space made on the driveway.

His mother had already appeared at the threshold of the two-story home and was hurriedly making her way down the slabbed path with her crumbled hip causing a noticeable limp. She moved onto the grass, hopped about boulder and obscure garden sculpture.

Beside the hip, she was looking well, Raymond considered. Her locks were uninterruptedly longer since the last time he promised to stopover and committed to it.

"Hey, darling," she greeted before quickly collecting him in her freckled arms.

She had an atmosphere of fabric softener, and paper. Envelopes.

While she held on, so did an unfortunate silence. A pause which replaced the otherwise auto queued 'How are you doing?'. Raymond's mother had stopped herself asking the open question. She knew not to ask this time.

Instead, Raymond asked, "Are you okay?" while still holding onto his mother. Looking towards the neighbour's degraded trailer.

"I'm okay, darling. We're okay," she tried to say encouragingly. She squeezed Raymond, and though not wanting to, let him free albeit keeping a hand attached to his shoulder. "Let's go in." She looked for his eyes. "Let's get something to drink, huh? Hot or alcoholic, you choose."

"Alright," he replied, pressing on top of his mother's hand with his own. "I'll be right there. Go."

She offered, "You need me to take anything with me?"

"I got it. You go in. I'll get my shit, and I'll be right in after."

"Of course." She wouldn't question how long it'd take to collect a bag from backseat or boot. So, without longer hesitation, she retraced her hurried steps and faded into the house he'd also once called home, leaving the entrance behind her open.

Raymond circled back as well. He stood beside his driver's side and glanced at the duffel bag slumped on the backseats. Inside were loaded a few sets of plain clothes. Enough to cover the two nights. Time apart. Time away before he would've then returned home.

Raymond left the bag where it was. He fell back into his car, plugged in his seatbelt and drove away from his parents.

## Illinois

"There were a young couple, came from New York. In Two-Thousand-and-Five. They'd gone through Columbus, Indianapolis, Chicago, and were en route to Iowa, Iowa City next. Anyone in Illinois or Indiana who said they'd met Tyler and, and I can't remember her name now... her name... her name was A- Ashley. Anyone who met Tyler and Ashley said they were conventional for who they were. Meaning so, unoffensively. Their normality was apparent. Rich parents were the assumption. Young lovers, whole lives ahead of them, setting out for cross country. They made a point of saying 'thank you' a lot of locals happened to comment. They said they'd made sure to 'thank' someone every time that someone was doing their job. Cooking the meal they'd paid for. Serving their drinks, offering directions. Taking away their

cleaned plates.” The local, who spoke with a more south accent, picked an onion ring off his plate with his thick fingers. He ate it then tried to suck the grease off his pinched fingers before wiping them instead on a napkin punched free from a holder. “The night before it happened, they said Tyler returned to the Marshal’s Rest first. By himself. That he’d looked as if he’d walked for some stretch. His footwear was especially dirtied. He was sweating. The madame that worked on reception at the Marshal’s Rest in Two-Thousand-and-Five told reporters that he’d seemed *displaced*. He’d smiled to her as he’d passed and headed to the stairs to go up to the last room on the second floor. She said it was thirty-five or forty-minutes later, that the girl, the girl Ashley, arrived as well back at the rooms. But she’d driven. She’d come back by herself in their camper they’d so far travelled together in. And her boots weren’t as covered in dirt. The receptionist said the girl tried not to make any eye contact with her and she went straight up to the room as well.

“The next morning, when the receptionist started her shift, she saw the car was not parked exactly where it was the night before. It was one space over. She was sure. She thought that it’d been moved a space to the left.

“The boy came out of the room first. Dressed. And asked her if she had seen the girl he was travelling with. The receptionist of course was honest, and she told him, no she’d not seen Ashley. She said Tyler was distressed. But he did nothing about it right away. He’d paced by the van, walked around the site and made a point to repeatedly call her mobile phone and leave, maybe purposely, loud voicemails sounding concerned. She said then he asked her to call the local sheriff’s department and report her as a missing.”

He took a sizable bite out of his burger, the local. He patted his moustache with another napkin and decided then to take a fork from the table’s painted tin of cutlery to attack the onion rings again. He looked left, out of the booth he and Raymond occupied, to a fifteen-year-old in a second-hand wheelchair parked near to the corner of their table.

The early teen took from a small ceramic bowl of fries and fried strips of chicken in a takeaway box.

“Trent. Son, you sure you don’t want a shake?”

“No,” he muttered in return, pulling apart a fry.

The local’s next question was for Raymond, “You like the coffee?”

Raymond referred to the lack of taste left behind. “No complaints,” he offered.

The local patted his mouth again as he chewed on more food. “Deputies arrived,” he said. Then swallowed. “...soon after the receptionist did call them on Tyler’s behalf. They found the girl in a matter of hours. Trent, cover your ears. Please.”

Trent wiped the grease off his hands and did as his father had asked without so much as nodding.

“Where there’re tens of miles between one sign of established civilisation and the next, there’re the greatest expanses of crops. Majority’s corn. The dominance of the US’s production. And through it, are long, secluded roads connecting towns and states.

“Along one of these roads, not too far from the motel, deputy riding passenger spotted a noticeable dent in the crop’s wall. Drag marks in front of it. He and the deputy driving ventured in together and discovered the girl’s body.” The local put his knife down and sipped his own coffee. “She was left, lying on her side, her throat cut. Trousers removed, but she had her underwear on still and it was intact, they reported. They’d found red clothing fibre under a few of her fingernails on one hand, but n- never found a match to the fibre.

“Tyler was already questioned, but he was questioned again after Ashley’s body was found. He was what we started to call ‘dressed suspect’s which we’d called before the ‘substitute suspect’. If the Naked’s aren’t going to be blamed, then it’s a suspect that wears clothes. The substitute suspect’s the primary for anyone who thinks the Naked’s are myth. Or believe that if they were real in some form, then that they had nothing to do with a crime committed.

“The second time the boy’s questioned he changed parts of his story. Supposedly. But the second time he’s questioned, one of the interrogating officers jumped early. He’d gone ahead. And he might’ve led Tyler with speculation. He tells Tyler about disappearances and sightings from past years. And he tells Tyler what the Naked’s are. Tyler, afterwards, recalled stopping alongside a road the day before. Told the officers, Ashley needed to piss. So, he’d pulled over and even though he’d called after her, ‘don’t go too far’, she’d walked into high grass so she wouldn’t be seen in case there were any other cars. Both of them are back in the car, driving again, Tyler said Ashley seemed ‘spooked’. When he checked on her, he said

she told him that she thought at first, he'd followed her into the grass. That she'd heard something. She'd felt she was being watched. She'd thought she heard whispers. Tyler puts the radio on, and told the officers, they'd forgotten about the stop after that."

Having allowed long enough of a pause to test whether it was for dramatic effect before the local would go on with his absorbing retelling, Raymond asked, "What happened afterwards?"

"Afterwards, nothing happened," the local answered, scratching his scalp and washing burger bun from his throat with another flush of hot black coffee. "Tyler goes back to New York. Presumably, he moves on, meets another girl. And the deputies search a while for the Nakeds again." He turned the diner's mug to see the evolving stains on the inside lip. "Thing to remember is, the road where Tyler said he'd pulled over was before the Marshal's Rest. It was outside the corn belt."

"You have a theory? Think they're moving outwards?"

"Who?"

Raymond specified, "The Nakeds."

The local looked at the table between them. At the sesame seeds left of his early dinner, the smeared tracks of sauce and across from him, Raymond's hands. "I wouldn't say that's what my theory was."

"Do you know anything more about them?"

He carried his eyes up to Raymond, "The Nakeds? Yeah... a little. But it's even more unsubstantiated than what I've already given you so far." He turned again, "Trent. *Trent*," he half yelled. "Hands down."

Trent let his aching arms fall.

While the local's attention was elsewhere, Raymond eyed the tin of cutlery. A flicker of motivation. A sort of physical twinge in muscle in his collar. He quickly slipped a steak knife from the cutlery tin and snuck it into a trouser pocket.

"Thank you, son." The local paid focus again to Raymond while rubbing his right eyebrow, "If you want more, I'd recommend you head to Marshal's Rest. It became quite a hot spot for sightings after Tyler. Or head further. If you can keep going until Iowa." He finished off his coffee. "I want to ask, though, Ray- Ray, was it? You said-"

"Ray. Raymond."

"Raymond. Raymond." He took his hand away from his own face. "Why're you here?"

"I'd like to find them."

"You're after Nakeds?"

"I am," Raymond committed, with an attempt at sounding determined.

"A group of Nakeds anyway. Because if you were to actually find any, you wouldn't find *all* of them. Given sightings cross the entire midwestern territory where there're crops." He glanced again at Raymond's paws. At the scratches in the silver of a wedding ring. "Why do you want to find them?"

Raymond felt the knife hidden in his pocket. "What reasons could there be?"

The local leaned back, resting into the booth's leather. "Where to start. I think you could make up any reason. You don't want to tell me yours?"

Raymond mimicked the local's position, leaning back too, on his side of the booth. "Because they take children."

The local shrugged. He looked once more to his son's vacant expression, and to his plate again. Eventually, he replied with a purposeful lack of enthusiasm, "Do they?"

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Raymond hid inside his car after vacating the mundanely designed diner.

The unblocked sun had cooked the seats. Baby seat included.

There were three missed calls and a voicemail from 'Ma', and another missed call from 'Emily' on Raymond's phone. He focused for a second on the notifications, then shoved the phone inside the glove box and luckily remembered the knife holstered in his pocket before it'd nibbled or gnawed at his leg. He took it out, put it into the nearest door's gutter.

Opening the glove box again, he took out a set of maps, unfolded the dated navigation and began to plan the next part of his route.

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A vibrantly tangerine sunset stirred the pot of blue sky and spilled behind the low and unimpressible build. Two women trudged and chatted, crossing the first-floor walkway. Leaving one room and going into another a half dozen numbered doors along.

On the left side of the characterless face of rooms-to-rent, was an attached structure. A reception put together with the same beige slathered brick. Through the later implemented automatic doors, a man with a fair goatee, far through his forties, sat behind the high counter. A man, not a woman as Raymond might have expected as he switched off his engine and peered across the cement carpet for parking.

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Room seven was indistinguishable from any other at a roadside motel imperceptible to investors. The curtains were hideously patterned a gross stain of pink and brown that had paled with age and exposure to the bleached setting. Imprisoning the card-thin carpet, were walls which, at an irregularly heightened point, intentionally changed from one shade to another only slightly darker. An old, alone wooden frame hung just crooked above the single, olive-quilted bed and side table. The flimsy door showed signs of past forced entries. Fractures, and chipped wood. Paint stripped about the single key lock and the above, screw-loose latch.

Raymond set his duffel bag beside the bed.

In his same clothes, he laid down and shut his eyes.

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Something was taking place across the street.

A police cruiser had pulled over and the two officers up front watched an area amidst civilians. They were fixed to whatever it was. Whatever it was, Raymond couldn't identify.

No one else seemed bothered by it. Not unnerved. They went along down the sidewalk. Treaded over the minced autumn leaves and red brick laid at the foot of the park's outskirt monument.

Raymond turned to Emily, who sat back within reach, in a matching outdoor chair. With one hand on her bump, she too watched whatever concerned the two police officers.

"Is it bad?" he dared ask, unable to move.

Emily *shrieked*. "*Ray!*" and the scene fell apart.

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"There's another sighting every month. There's probably more than that, but those are the ones I hear about. That make it to us. And we're said to have the least here in Illinois, as well. What I hear's as good as nothing. Could all be bullshit. All the sightseers who seem afraid by what they said they've seen's no good if they're not taking photos or tying one up and bring it either here or to the sheriff's department. Most tell similar stories. Maybe that means something. They say they're driving, and they spot something. And someone in the pickup or the van point to the fields and swear they saw naked torso and head of a shaven man or woman appear. Then their girlfriends who were talking, or their friends or family look, and they either see the same thing or the naked man or woman is gone.

"Less often, there're *actual* encounters. Drivers have pulled over, stopped because a man has stood ahead of them in the middle of the road." The goateed receptionist gestured a hand forward, playing himself as the driver. "There have been naked women- their women laid across the road. They apparently *mangle* themselves, lie all twisted to look like victims of a hit-and-run or some other form of unjust violence... to lure families because they're more likely to stop at the sight of a woman in need of saving. And once they've stopped... more have sprung from hiding in the crops. Either in haunting silence or while screaming, they drag the passengers out of their cars, hold them down, cover their eyes and take their children into the fields.

"We have guests who disappear. They set out on foot when they still have another night or more paid for. We don't see them come back. We don't know if they ever return."

Raymond stood at the counter, uncomfortably warm in his only change of clothes. "If you were going to look for them, where would you look first?"

"Anywhere in the crops," the receptionist vaguely put, sliding his glasses off, "Where they start. To when they end in Kansas and Nebraska. And lord knows what else you could find." With a cloth, he wiped a fingerprint from the lens. "Why're you here, sir?"

"I'm searching for them."

"Why would you want to find them?"

Raymond upped his chin. He eyed a white-faced, ticking clock mounted onto the wall behind the receptionist. "I feel something has to be done."

"Something," muttered the receptionist, who then realigned his glasses, "I'm going to offer you a small little bit of advice if that's okay with you, sir?"

"If it'll help." Raymond's thinking went ahead, moving further down the road.

"Just this... It's okay, to want to help with something that's entirely..." How did he put this politely, he considered, "...over *there*. Out of your way. But is there something else back the way you came? That you should be..."

Raymond cut him short, "Thank you for the advice."

"More than I've tried to count come inwards this far. Illinois, Iowa. To leave again everything just as unresolved."

"Okay," Raymond turned half towards the exit. "In what direction are the crops?"

A woman waited on the cusp. She stood, a judging blocker at the wide open, automatic exit. Even with eyes behind circular, midnight shaded sunglasses, it was obvious she directed her question at Raymond, "When are you going to realise?"

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An acne of sunlight was emitted through the stem entombing, onto the between tracks of crumbled dirt. Every stem at its root was tan. Ridged and sunken up to a half foot where it came more to life, becoming green and more expansive in size.

Within the linear thicket, Raymond kept still. He had led himself from civilisation. Crouched down and hid. Feeling threatened by the enormous, surrounding silence.

He surveyed his own car. Watched where he had left it, engine running, open door, on the suppressed road buffered by five-foot-tall corn. On a continuous loop, he checked it on all sides. Every few minutes, he checked behind himself as well, feared he was caught in his own underdeveloped trap.

For near an hour, nothing approached ahead or behind the car. Nor from either side, through the crops. When it felt all but conclusive that he was alone and that nothing was going to be so easily tricked, he waited even longer.

Inside the glove box, still ignored, was his phone.

Another four missed calls from Ma. Another eight from Emily.

Iowa

A group of five men were an extended suite of coughs, unconfident laughter and short, separating conversations crackling around the table inside the mostly navy diner.

Raymond drank his second refill of coffee as he tried to catch more than a few words of what it was three of the men were discussing away from the others who were flapping menus and ordering a late breakfast.

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Outside the diner, while his back was turned, someone approached Raymond.

"You happen to have a light?"

The knife was in the gutter. Raymond turned around.

One of the six men came to a metre away from him. He held a zippo in a rough fist and gripped a cigarette between two lineups of well-treated teeth.

"No, I don't. I'm sorry," Raymon answered, a mutter of wind catching in tufts of his hair.

"It's alright," he said, skin brushed with a first coat of sweat. He was straight-faced, one eye shut while it got shot with a redirect of sunshine. "I could stop being so fucking lazy and get one off Pat who's standing give or take... twenty feet away..."

Raymond huffed. He tried to find Pat.

"What's your name?"

"Raymond."

The man put out the hand not gripping the spent lighter, hoping to shake Raymond's. "Raymond"

"Ray."

"Ray. Patrick." They shook hands. "There're two of us. Patricks. One over there has become Pat. Good to meet you, Ray. You said you didn't have a lighter?"

"What- No. No, sorry."

"Oh, yeah, of course. What then... are you- What are you doing here? Not at this diner. Iowa, I mean. You just passing through?"

"I'm..." Raymond considered the options of response inside his limited imagination. "...yeah, passing through. Going to see my mother. She's in Kansas."

"Bullshit," Patrick reacted. Though, his expression was not as measurably argumentative. "I don't know. I don't know why, that just felt like a lie, Ray. Is it true? Your mum's in Kansas?"

"No." The baby seat had a beating heart. It was right there, just outside the corner of his sight. "I did lie. Er. The truth is I'm looking for someone."

"That's still not quite it. Is it? But- But I'll shut the fuck up- sure, sure, okay, I- I'm sorry, I'm out of turn, what right do I have, I'm not anyone who's earned to really know what's going on." Patrick took the cigarette out of his mouth, which didn't affect the great speed at which he spoke. "Who're you looking for?"

The driveway. Cracks in the cement. Dark grass overgrown. Weeds, and a window open.

"Did you lose someone to the N8s? The Nakeds? I'm maybe making the assumption that you know who- no, I'm not saying 'who' for them... that you know *what* they are? Do you know what they are?"

"No," Raymond pretended. His decision to do so was immediate.

"Then I'm sorry to be the first to let you in and inform you... Especially if it's a child that you've lost and are looking for, Ray. And for your hope's sake, I'll be selective in what I'll tell you." Patrick looked away from their conversation. He looked off to a distance. To trees with dramatic, anecdotal flair. "There's something here called Nakeds. Or, what our termed N8s throughout certain legal documents 'unobtainable' to the public. We assume the eight in N-eight is representative of the year Two-Thousand-and-Eight, *the* year with the most reported encounters so far. They're human... only as far as what species. Otherwise, behaviour wise, they're fucked. Adults surrendered to violence. And abduction," he declared before leaving only a moment for a breath to escape. "They exist unclothed. They hide in the crop fields within the corn belt, which is Iowa, Indiana, Kansas, Missouri. They ambush cars on the long stretches of remote and hidden road, night or day they don't seem to care, and they take from trailers, from pickups." He glanced at Raymond with an expression to suppose condolences. "They'll take children."

As before, Raymond left room for the storyteller to go on.

"We're here to get them. At least, some of the ones in Iowa."

"All of you?" Raymond asked, counting six then making up the group. Men who, all except Patrick, carried on with their conversations in a gathering around the unexceptional, standard blue and silver cars driven all the way from home sweet home driveways in other states.

"The six of us, yeah," Patrick assured himself, checking over his own shoulder. "We were all laid off. Lost our jobs. And the rest is just probably going to follow. Doesn't matter in this moment because we're here now. We're taking no hostages." He spoke quieter, "Keep this to yourself, Ray... We are loaded up to our necks. And the idea is we *drastically* reduce their numbers and maybe save a few of those taken if there's any chance they've not yet been skinned and or eaten."

Raymond spotted the butt of a hunting rifle leant against window inside one set of the backseats.

"We worked together until about a month ago. Now we'll be working together again."

"Is it murder?"

"Killing Naked's? You know what, Raymond, I don't know. A lot of people don't seem to think they exist, so... Can you kill what doesn't exist? If we can, maybe we just don't tell anyone? Maybe we'll keep going until they're all gone." Patrick asked Raymond, "Who were you looking for? You can give me a description, and your phone number and if we find them, I'll tell you."

Raymond slung another glance at the butt of the rifle. "I'm looking for the Naked's."

Patrick finally slowed down, a heft of puzzlement landing on his shoulders. "You are?"

Raymond nodded, "Yeah."

"You realise when I'd asked, you said you didn't know what they were?"

"Yeah."

Patrick leant. He all but stepped back. Watched Raymond's indifference, his lack of outward emotion, show no change. "I'm going." He tossed his unsmoked cigarette. "I'll see you, Ray."

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It ached. Pained his hand. Shot up his arm. It crushed and tried the durability of the one set of knuckles inside Emily's desperately taut fingers.

She squeezed. She screamed as her voice broke. Cried, and wailed unendingly, and lasted the previously unfelt agony as she flinched and kicked her bare feet up at nothing. Bared her choppily ridged teeth. Sweated.

There was something there in the bedroom, with them.

Its undressed arms were fastened around Emily's inflated stomach. It lifted her off the ground, pulling at his grip like cord. It gripped her stomach until

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There was no movement in the surrounding darkness.

At least, not in close sight of Raymond.

Seat reclined, his head was flat against the headrest and his nose pointed above the windshield. He thought to somehow make sure to wake up again before sunrise to move the loaded rifle from where it laid slack, across his lap to somewhere in the car much more conspicuous.

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Joshua took a VHS from its shrivelled, unmarked card sleeve and loaded it into the VCR fitted underneath and as part of the CRT television above the back cupboards.

"Going to skip it forward to the important part," he muttered as he pushed fast-forward on the VCR.

At double speed, the three friends on video smiled toward the alternating one of them behind the camera. Immediately, they played themselves as friends. Sung as they travelled. Danced, ate and waved arms at rest stops. Held up peace signs and middle-fingers before the camera panned over silhouetted mountaintops. They climbed across each other. They behaved inseparably.

"Here we are." Joshua hit play, and the tape changed back to normal speed.

Neither the two teen women, nor the teen man were in view. Instead, they were filming ahead. Filming the out from inside the van. Recorded coming dirt road between tall corn fields with tips frosted beautifully gold by the rising sun.

The date on the video was '07/19/2007'.

'What is that?' one of the two women in the video asked out loud.

'It's a person,' the other answered.

'What are they doing?'

'Stu, slow down.'

'I don't think we should stop,' Stu said.



'We're not going to run them over.'

'I'll go around. I'll go around them, but I'm not- stopping.'

'Oh, my God.'

'Oh, shit.'

The camera caught a figure. It stood still. Stood almost perfectly centre of the single lane and was faced the other way.

'They're not wearing any clothes.'

'Where have they come from?'

'Stu, don't. Stu, we should stop.'

'I'm not stopping.'

'What if they need help-'

'Don't stop close to them. Pull o- Pull over way back- way back from them. In case they're in trouble.'

'Stop filming,' Stu said, sounding increasingly discomforted.

The figure had not moved.

Stu slowed the van. He came to a stop twenty metres back from the figure. The camera held steady.

The figure's stature was feminine. Its hair fell some ways past its shoulders and past its shoulders, were no identifiable marks or other notable characteristics exposed by its nudity.

'Hello?' Stu yelled out his window. 'Shit,' he said inside the van. 'If they needed help, wouldn't they say something back? She didn't even turn around.'

'Wait a second.'

Five seconds. Waited, in silence.

'Holy Shi- Dr- Drive. Drive- Stu-' cried the teen in the back, "*drive!*"

The camera shot round inside the van to the back doors as one then immediately the other was pulled open and two inhumanly tall, entirely naked men, without hesitation, started to get in. As they invaded with muscular arms first, the teen in the back did not stop screaming. She retreated, landing onto loose mattress and stool and onto her back. She frantically wormed to her elbows and tried scurrying away as they trod on sleeping bag and soon caught her ankles.

"Oh, my God!"

The van sped. It accelerated and the men who were caught on camera dragged the teen toward the back before surrendering their opportunity and letting her go. Before it moved too fast, they dove from the open and hit the road like shit. Rather than roll, they landed unevenly on forearms and feet-forced-to-knees but got up imminently and raced in a direct line, retreating straight into the crops.

As Stu slung the van around the cemented woman, the camera locked onto her.

Once they had evaded her, she finally acted. She chased the van without a word or a bark escaping her throat. To her side, the two men reappeared, splitting crop and joining the chase.

As they fell behind, they continued still after the van.

Stu yelled, 'Stop filming!'

The recording ended.

Joshua got up off the creaking, acutely bowlegged stool and ejected his videotape.

"I'd argue it isn't real," instantly commented the middle-aged owner of the garage-sized bar as he moved from where he leaned against front counter to turn and lean, arms crossed, against the back cupboards. "What's the likelihood they started filming right before they saw the woman?"

"I told you, Todd, it's not that unlikely," Joshua sleeved the VHS and held it in his protecting grip, ready to head back to his store. "You see how much they were filming. Look at how much I skipped over. And if it's fake, why's it just on a tape with a lot of other footage unlike it?"

"There it is, anyway," Todd turned to Raymond, who was sat up with his chest and conscious interest over the bar. "What do you think? Do you think it's real?"

Raymond retained eyes on the black screen for a moment longer. "Where did you find it?"

"I can't tell you," Joshua said, "But where I got it, they believed it was stolen from evidence after it was first found in the crops not much further along the road from where they were ambushed."

Raymond asked, "Do you know where they were ambushed?"

Pulled over so far to one side outlining stalks were forced against the driver's side. Lank leaves pressed against the glass, bridged black insects. Obscured any view of the cloud-shoed sky.

Raymond sat. He replayed the segment of VHS over in his memory as he stared ahead at what he thought for almost certain, was the identical stretch of farm-enveloped road which featured in the supposed 'found footage'.

There were no Nakers. The fast route shortcut to Kansas was unimpeded.

The scene was so quiet, that Raymond heard his phone vibrate. It rattled the dense plastic of the glove box causing the material to make a frustrated, anthropomorphic moan. It personified Raymond's internalisation. Repeated calls. The thought of the cause. It upset his heart. Hurt his chest, and his teeth.

He hit the horn. He smacked it. Pressed down on it as the emotion pressed on him. The horn sounded long enough for an echo to follow. He scrubbed his teeth on his crusted top lip. Felt an imagined pin prick his shoulder blade. The Midwest heat was getting hotter.

Raymond cranked the window. Shorter stems wobbled. The pressing leaves fell inside and tickled his ear when he tipped sideways, gripped outside the door and spoke out loudly to the surroundings, "Don't go too far, hon." He drew in a deep breath, announced even louder, "Stay where I can see you."

He fixed his ears. Listened.

There was no detectable reaction. There was no noise. No movement. No threat, except another incoming call. Another groan.

He palmed the steering wheel again. Forced it, for longer. When he finally let go, he shouted again, "Not too far, hon!" and held his breath and listened.

Silence.

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"He was normal. You know. He grew up pitching and batting, riding a bike, watching movies, his life was normal. He got older. Got older like anyone else. Did work. Had jobs, worked for an asshole, or assholes I expect... people probably less qualified, and he buried his insecurities in bottles and in bars rather than talk to Maggie. He wouldn't let their two sons see it. Wouldn't dare tell *anybody* he saw himself as this failure. More destructive than the insecurity, was the consumption. As I said, Ant was a drinker. And that's to do with where he was supposed to be when they first realised he was gone.

"Was a Friday. Ant argued that he'd had a big fight with his boss and was going to stay home and rest, likely fall asleep on the couch without feeling bad about it. Maggie got it, understood he was tired, but she told him the meetings were more important. He shouldn't skip one. And he needed to go if he truly was going to be committed and give up the drinking. Ant fought while not once moving up more than just sitting up on the couch. But Maggie said, eventually he gave in, and he changed out of his work clothes. Mag said he went. He left, went out by foot after kissing her on the forehead and telling her, 'Love you'.

"Maggie waited thirty minutes after the time she expected Ant home before she was going to try and find out where he was. Before it was thirty minutes, Ant called her first. Only he'd only called for long enough that the call came through to Maggie's phone, but not long enough so she'd had time to pick it up. She tried to call back. She got no answer. And she'd tried again, no answer, and so she didn't wait long before calling nine-one-one."

The owner of Gus' Bison sat opposite to Raymond on the reused picnic bench as he told the tale. He wasn't drinking. He was working. Instead, he smoked, and watched little birds flutter about nests.

"This happened in Naperville. If you don't know it, it's a big suburb outside Chicago. The search brought them west. Brought them here because, it took them some time but, they picked up Ant on camera. He'd stopped at a gunshot in Morris and then carried on in our direction."

Raymond dressed his throat with beer.

"Ant never went home," the owner said, looking at Raymond.

"Where did he go?"

"That's still unsolved. Depending on what you think about certain things, you'll tend to accept one of two potentialities. Ant hid from everyone that he was setting out to find the Nakers, and bought the gun because, like most, expected a cult. Satanics. Cannibalism. Or, really acknowledging Maggie's

statements, Ant went where his body wouldn't be discovered after he'd shot himself. The thought being he could save Maggie any pain."

At the conclusion, to the owner Raymond seemed less invested in the anecdote. Disappointed at Naked's deficiency in the tragedy, maybe, he speculated.

"If you're committed to the part," the owner said, and pointed, "you need to keep going. You need to get further. You think you can go to Nebraska?"

Raymond played with the leather strap on his watch. He ran some of his fingers like a comb through the increasingly greasy hair on the back of his head. "I want to save those children."

"Of course."

He looked at the owner, "What do you mean 'part'?"

The owner looked to his wife as she drifted by their table, collecting few glasses, intentionally listening in on the ongoing conversation Raymond had asked for. She shrugged to her husband and carried on by.

"The part where you find Naked's." The owner slid Raymond's finished drink nearer the table's sudden drop. "Would you like another?"

Raymond's tiredness was apparent. With swollen sockets and stubbled, paling complexion, he offered the subtlest nod. The owner pressed fists against the table, unfolded his jeaned knees and got up from the bench.

"You've never seen them? In Iowa," Raymond asked.

"I've never seen them."

"Never? Not even thought that maybe you did?"

"No. Never. But I'm sure that I've heard enough to pretend to be an expert." The owner felt it fair to say, "It wasn't intended. That... their seekers... seekers of the Naked's, are a part of our décor. I think it's probably men like yourself, and the odd woman, set on the hunt that've kept our business from breaking." The owner began to make his way from the tables out front towards the opened doors of his bar. "You've saved us so far... so, thank you."

Raymond sat up straight. "Do they usually come back?" he sent to follow the owner.

"Sometimes," he answered. "Sure... you could ask how do we know? Could it be they just didn't stop off here on their way back. No. Investigators show up. They bring their photos. They ask us what we know." The owner half-turned. "Those that do come back... they say they turned around. They seem freed. And some'll leave and then come back searching again."

"Why can't they be found?"

"You tell me." The owner went on with his trip back to the bar.

-

Raymond left to rest his fifth drink.

The owner was pulled up next to him at his bar, and his wife led the conversation from the other side.

"She was a beautiful girl," she said, no longer afraid of the physical throb that came when speaking about what'd happened. "And if it was always meant to end with this heartbreak, then I've sworn to my older sister that she would've never wanted to change anything about the time she had with her up until the moment."

Her niece was painted in accurate colour across her hurtful recollection. The constant joyful expression. Infant white hair. Tablecloth scrunchies. space between teeth. Her sister, hair falling, grinning, folded over her. Wiping the ice cream off her cheeks.

"What about the driver?" Raymond asked, thinking about the two stolen weapons put away in his car.

"What about her?" she said. "What's it matter?"

"Raine, her hus- Denise's sister's husband tried to follow it," the owner said, accepting a drink now. "The search. Trying to find the driver. But," he sipped, "...she immediately stopped him. I think Raine all but physically held him down."

"Not all but. She did," Denise said, enthusiastically. "She laid her hands on him. She put herself in the doorway and rightfully told him to leave it to the police. He was needed at home. He needed to be there. They needed each other. With what happened, what we have *all* had to go through, but my sister more

than anyone..." She blinked a few times. Scratched beneath one eye. "I think... there's probably nothing scarier than losing a child."

"No," Raymond about whispered. He tried his glass for a last drip.

Denise dropped her wrist and her hand from her face, onto Raymond's arm. She pressed. "Good luck to you, Ray."

-

His Fayetteville coat offered almost no comfort as he laid backwards in his partially reclinable driver's seat for another night. Rashes had developed in uncomfortable places. His inner thighs, armpits, and feet were sore. The coverings of dark hair felt knotted. His clothes were cold. A lingered dampness resultant from constant by day body sweat dabbed against their folds.

Between intermittent eyes closed, Raymond watched the nearest open stretch. The mile or so of patted down dirt and rubble that transitioned to tall crops.

On the verge of the fence of stems, there looked to be something moving.

A figure trailed the edge.

Less than awake, Raymond acted as though drugged. The motivation to creep out of his car and to follow was inexistent. The implausible situation fought for his reactive action, and it'd failed in competition against his luring exhaustion.

When Raymond's eyes shut, the figure appeared to stop. It held still.

Then it ran. It sprinted. Not shouting, not screaming. It sprinted from where it was two-hundred metres away, right towards Raymond.

-

Raymond was further from the hospital bed than his body was.

The nurse was both inside the room and as well, somewhere else in the hospital.

"I'm sorry."

In the bed, Emily sat up only just so her back lifted off the already hundred-and-thirty-five-degreed mattress. The covers fell down her. She shook. Her head shook, and her pretty, unpainted features twitched. She threw up her hands, not sure what to do with them. "What?"

They were both, confused.

"No." She begged, "No, *no*."

The circumstances couldn't change.

"I had her."

The nurse tried to hold Emily's hand.

"She wa- She was in my arms. I had her- w- what do you mean she's not-?" Emily turned to him. Their eyes encountered. "*Come on*. Ray, what-? What are they-? It can't..."

His expression was confirmation. Distress. Dread. And end.

"No..." she mumbled once more. Her reddening face mangled inwards and screwed into a ruptured, heart-severed collapse. She sobbed. She whined in a way he'd never before heard. "*Please*."

## Nebraska

Beneath a tinged sky scattered with incredible, pinkish clouds and the lighter trails of a few flights, Raymond sat. He sat legs crossed on a slope, the rifle he took beside him, and he watched and attempted to spot something once more. Straight, paralleled lines through the sand brown crops all ran away together and went as far as the haze on the horizon.

His car was at the bottom of the hill he'd hiked. Left again, engine breathing, on a road cut through the unmonitored land. A desperate temptation for his prey.

Inside the glove box remained his phone. And far enough from it not to hear its calls, he could not entirely distract himself from imagining that it continued to ring repeatedly. Envisioning the worry. Over,

and over. His mother would've waited inside her home. Readied coffee. Bought a movie and baked pastries for the short stay. She would've expected he'd be right behind her. When he wasn't, she would've returned to the drive and seen his car gone. She'd called. She'd be saddened as well as concerned. Disappointed to lose the chance to comfort him while he grieves. Emily would've gotten a call from her. She'd have explained he'd disappeared, and asked, did he speak to her? Emily would've played down her own confusion. She'd have conjured theories. Though not one made obvious sense of the reason for not calling her first. And so, soon, she called, too. She called repeatedly, feeling more alone.

Raymond thought about getting into his car. He thought about outside the hospital at six as the sun rose. Leaving through reception and needing to be there no longer. Sitting down in his driver's seat as Emily opened the passenger's side. With the physical-formed remnants of another loss, she cautiously lowered her exhausted self into the seat. Her hands feel out of sight at her sides. She rested her weakened arms unnaturally to try not to feel her own stomach. Hair pulled tight and tied, she set the back of her head against the headrest and closed her wetted eyes. She breathed slow.

Raymond looked at his wife. He was tortured by the inescapability of her ever-swelling agony. A constant pain peppered only so often with fast dashes of hope that were as quickly taken from her. His frustration was overwhelming. Attempts to conceive. And to conceive the gruelling unfairness of repeated attempts and failures. No purpose for the hurt caused.

'I guess we should go home,' Emily said, eyes closed, before he started the car.

And I should go home. He told himself while alone on the hill.

He wiped snot from his nose. Cleared away a spot of a tear. Raymond rubbed his palms, and he picked himself up. As he got up, his back ached. An ache that led him to picture Emily again. A portrait which captured the pain she must feel. He heard her. Her breathless reaction to the pain.

'Ray. Ray, hel- help me'.

Out in the open, in plain view, there was something.

-

A Naked had appeared in the distance. It walked slowly, almost floating, near a singled tree in the lower cut fields.

Raymond stopped where he was, slightly crouched, on higher ground. He waited. Truthfully, he expected to suddenly wake up. He did not believe what he was finally witnessing. He did not believe the Naked's were more than myth.

Yet, the Naked appeared. It was there. And it was haunting.

Raymond treaded. He'd kneeled to pick the rifle up off the ground and started to move down the elongated slope, creeping into waist-height crops. Gathering gradual momentum, he kept low and hoped fiercely not to be noticed until he was much closer.

A field from him, it happened to look in his direction. Raymond stopped. He halted first, then barely ducked, but the sudden motion shook the plantation about his limbs. It was more movement than what could be blamed on wind or insect. Though, it might've worked. The Naked's attention stayed in his direction. Stayed without change or reaction.

Until it didn't. And the Naked ran and shot off west.

Raymond sprung. He huffed, and he chased the Naked through the skin tickling, itching, and scratching crops. One minute they below his ribs and the next, over and above his head while the terrain tested his ankles.

He lost sight of everything. The ground ahead was unmarked. The world around was farm. It was camouflaging. He drowned out the distant cries for help with the blood flow pulsating in his ears and the frantic pattering of his flat feet and the hurried exhales of the Naked he went after.

Raymond did not stop running.

Although, the rifle was a struggle to hold onto. The cross strap tugged at and caught on his tending arm and put up resistance as the barrel batted the cascade of longer, dropped leaves.

Raymond ran still.

Emily stopped pushing. The suffering exhales of a woman were keeping up.

He saw her. Through the giant's hair comb of green. The roots battering her hips, rattled in aftereffect. Dust kicked up after her ankles and the dirtied soles of her feet.

He was going to catch her. She was moving within reach, and as he tried to grab her by her hand, the field of corn enveloping them ended.

They appeared in a clearing.

Out of breath, the Naked collapsed over a stretch of several more yards in the open. Raymond stopped, kept against the shaken corn, the plants' ears and silks grazing the back of his stiffened arms and legs. A fly zipped, too, out from the plants, and squatted on the back of his supporting hand as he raised the rifle. He pointed it at the woman's neck as she stayed on her hands and knees, faced away. It took a second before he realised...

"Oh, fuck," he uttered.

There were more. A seemingly calm group of men and women together, no children, sat in a disfigured circle on the ground, although they themselves were not disfigured in individual appearance. Most rested with their legs together and hands massaging knees, showered by the sunset's haze. Heads were shaved or hair was short. Some were more regularly fitted, with weather-washed locks. None had shoes. Otherwise, most of the women wore clothes. Vests, and sleeves-cut to make tank tops, and floral dresses and skirts. And there were fewer, however every other man was dressed.

Every Naked there looked back at Raymond. Unsettled, but maybe not surprised by his appearance.

"Hello," one said, cutting the silence.

Raymond focused on the Naked's who were naked. The small cuts, moles, and birthmarks. Signs of hurt, injury, individuality. All vulnerabilities unashamedly exposed. Worn outright, in place of clothes.

As Raymond looked at one evil scar on another's thigh, his own stung. The steak knife again forgotten in his pocket had poked and prodded and shallowly impaled the root of his right thigh as he'd ran. It bled under his jeans. It started to soak through.

Without reply to the greeting, without further hesitation, Raymond saw a nurse, and he turned the hunting rifle and its iron sights to one of the few, naked men in the circle.

The man's back was to Raymond. When Raymond fired, the shot struck his collar. It buried itself, leaving a hole and a sudden ring of blood spilling over the surrounding verge of skin as he bowed backwards, outstretched, and wailed in the worst shock and searing pain.

Raymond picked out who was next. The group reactively rolled around, clambered and got up and exploded outwards, scattering like the fading whiskers of fireworks. They raced off in one of two decided directions, trying to shield each other. They headed not for fields, but instead towards open land.

Raymond fired again, hole punching a woman in her stomach. And again, hitting another of the men, clipping his jaw, drawing drool, shattering his teeth and spilling tongue over rock. And again, dropping a slower runner.

-

A camper travelled an isolated road. Through his fractionally cracked windshield, the driver saw an unearthly sight west. Figures. Some unclothed and bolting, in silence, as though feral and with intent to terrify and possibly even harm any passers who dare pull over.

The driver tipped over seventy, hoping he'd escaped the full scene. All the while, he was grateful that for a minute, it took his mind off his cancer.

Raymond hunted the last four over another short clearing.

Near enough to one, he raised the rifle, held it steady and fired twice. The first shot went through the man's throat. It ruined veins. Decorated his shoulders with the blood. The second shot missed. Before firing a third shot, the man dropped, dead.

The three left changed course, heading up gradual hill.

The two women were surprisingly fast. If Raymond stopped again to aim, they could escape.

The man, meanwhile, made a jarring turn, diving into the bordering crop's jaws. He disappeared into the brown teeth, hoping to quickly be swallowed.

Raymond begrudgingly gifted the women an increasing chance of survival. He jogged along the outline of the crop until he reached clear signs of the man's consumption and the not yet shut mouth.

Once amongst the corn again, it wasn't so obvious in which direction the man had gone. Raymond beat stems. He hurriedly wiped dust and sweat out of his sockets and tried to trace breaks in leaf blades, sheath and tiller. It looked as if the man had gone nowhere. The path was not apparent. So, Raymond held dead still. When he held still, there was an audible snap.

He fired. Shot twice into the mess. Towards the slight noise.

Following after the direction of his shots, Raymond was surprised to find the last man. Naked, he laid flat on his front, genitals flopped. Hands caked with scratches. Part buried already with hardened clumps of soil. Blood flowed out from his chest and streamed down one side of his failing body.

He made miserable stutters. "Why?" he sputtered.

Raymond showed the man's chest to the rifle.

"Why're you here?"

"..." Raymond had forgotten. "The-" He remembered, "...Where are the children?"

The man dropped his head back against the earth. "We don't take children." His gums changed colour. He closed his eyes. "For- f- god's s- sake, we don't take *anything* from you."

"You're a fucking liar."

It took time and a lot of his dying energy to answer back, "You're too scared. T-"

The shot rung in Raymond's ears. It took another fraction of his hearing and muffled his senses. The second shot to his chest killed the man. A third shot didn't happen. Hard as Raymond tried, the rifle was spent.

-

The sun finally went to rest.

Raymond carried on across a loose strand of the belt. He walked west, further from Illinois and Iowa. Further from South Carolina, from phone calls, driveways, and hospitals. From his family, and from Emily.

The crops changed to all be eyelevel or to intimately tower over him. They stole any hope of insight to what was where and what was real anymore.

Raymond was lost.

But soon, as he thought once more about going home, there were out loud cries.

A sobbing revisited his unravelling. The haunting, human noise rung out in the quiet air and travelled as though slowed, over his head.

Raymond tracked the howls. And what he found, collapsed on top a dishevelled nest of grain, was one of the remaining two women who had survived his blind onslaught. She coiled and hunched. She curled over, hiding her stomach as flies looped, landed on her skin and trod in her sweat and blood. Strikes of pulsed red painted her legs.

She was not shot. Raymond had not shot her.

Despite his doing, he felt a strange urgency to ask, "Why is there blood?"

Planting a shaking hand on the ground, the woman pushed herself up inches and turned over. She cried still. And Raymond saw the blood ran from between her paled thighs.

She writhed.

Raymond stumbled. All temperature evacuated him. The sight overwhelmed.

Emily lied, defenceless. In underserved ruin. In desperation, in the field.

Iowa

The owner and his wife Denise held onto one another. They slow danced with no experience and spiralled in the smallest of flattened ovals for a moment as a slow song played out in their mistimed hums.

Sure enough, a uniformed young woman entered Gus' Bison and met them together at the bar.

Denise turned first. She smiled with a repetitive infliction of disappointment and greeted the lone, county officer.

“Evening,” she said.

A phone rang on a high, round table not far from the microphone and stand set up against the left wall.

The Philadelphian stood at the table ignored the call from ‘Baby’, instead betting his attention on the potential leading talk about NAKEDS about to occur within eavesdropping distance.

As another call tried, he swallowed nothing and turned his phone over.

for god’s sake, come home

re.occurrence

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