

HEAT HAZE

ROBERT MATHIS

EVACUATION

It was already too hot to be outside: one hundred and two degrees Fahrenheit and it was just eight o' clock. Ashley glanced back at the car, where she had left her four year old son, David, in the cool air conditioning. She was in a dilemma: leave the car on with her son in it, where it could be stolen, or take David with her and risk not getting her parents to go with her. She needed alone time with them—needed to talk straight with her mother. It would be difficult with David's ears listening to every word.

She had already talked to her parents, John and Emma, about leaving Phoenix, as it was getting close to dangerous levels this weekend. Thousands of people were evacuating the city while she was here, wondering if she should take David with her inside her parents' home or not. Cars were breaking down in the middle of the road, overheating, and people were starting to get crazy, taking things that didn't belong to them, including groceries, clothes, and even cars and houses. She could hear gunshots being fired in the distance. She couldn't stay very long.

A weird thought flew through her mind: if the car got stolen, at least David would survive. Or would he? If they would stay in the city, the temperature would go up to one hundred and fifty by lunch, and one hundred and seventy around four in the afternoon. This was just first of many heat storms that would strike the equator. The temperature had been rising for the last several months, and people were fleeing to the north. She would head north toward San Francisco, where her aunt, Esther, lived. It was a seven hundred and fifty miles to drive, so she would need to fill the car with gas at least three times, and they would need to stop somewhere to rest along the way.

Before leaving the car, she thought about her parents. She knew the outcome. It would be a goodbye—they wouldn't be going anywhere. Her father had a tumor the size of golf ball in his throat and he was stuck to the bed. Her mother, on the other hand, was healthy. Emma was only sixty five years old and had just entered retirement age. What a retirement.

Ashley hoped that at least she would join them on the trip north. Her dad was dying, anyway.

"David."

"Yes, Mom?"

"Stay in the car. It's nice and cool in here."

"Okay. Can I have your phone?"

"Sure, honey." Ashley handed him the phone where he sat, strapped down in the children's safety seat.

"I'm going to get Granny."

"What about Grandpa?"

Ashley swallowed. She knew he would stay behind. There was no cure; there was no point trying to flee from death when death had already gotten a grip on you. Her mother would probably want to stay with John. Suddenly, she figured out her strategy: she would tell her she needed her mother's help to get David to safety. David was everything to Emma. She did everything for him and spoiled him endlessly. Ashley turned off the car.

"I changed my mind, honey. You'll need to help me get Granny to come with us."

"Me?"

"Yes, dear, you've got something that Mommy doesn't have."

"What's that?"

"Cuteness, honey. Let's go." Ashley opened the door and the hot air embraced her.

She looked at her father where he lay in his bed. His pillow cover should have been white, but it was yellow with sweat and bodily fluids. It wasn't an old house, but the interior looked old. The wooden bed that her dad lay in had carved feet and posts. She remembered this red wood from when she was a kid; she had always been afraid of the lions, which served as the feet of the bed. The lions rested on a ragged carpet, which had a distinct smell from dust and old age. The room was dark and the curtains were drawn. The nightlight was on beside John's bed, giving a yellowish glow to the room, like the morning sun. It had always felt nice to come home to Mom and Dad, but not this time.

"Emma, go with Ashley—I'll be alright here." John said with a shaky voice. His hair, which had been dark and full of life when he was younger, now lay white and lifeless over his forehead, wet with sweat.

"No, I'm not going anywhere." Her mom sat beside the bed and poured water into a glass. She was a short woman and nearly always had an apron on—even if she wasn't cooking. "No need to make a mess." She'd always say, smiling, and would put cookies and bread on the table. There were always cookies and bread, and her coffee was great. Her dad had said, laughing, "That's why I married your mom: because of her coffee."

There were no cookies now, no coffee, and no laughter.

"Mom," Ashley pleaded. "Please, you will die here. Everybody is leaving. Listen to Dad. Please, Mom, I need you. David needs you."

"Your father needs me more, Ashley. That's how it is."

"It is just going to get worse, you know." Ashley covered her face with her hands.

"I know, dear." Her mother squeezed John's hand. "I know all too well. If it is our time to go, your dad and I will go together."

"Mom, please." Ashley took her hand. "Please, come with us."

"I'm thirsty, Mom." David pleaded.

Emma handed the glass of water to David. "Have a sip, dear." She put her hand on top of her daughter's hand and stroked it.

"Take care of David, dear. I'll take care of Dad."

"So, you're going to just wait here and die?" Ashley whispered the last word and looked in disbelief at her mother.

"Sometimes everyone has to, dear. David, come to Granny."

David, who loved his grandmother very much, didn't need her to tell him twice, and he ran to her.

"You be a big boy now, you hear? And take good care of Mommy."

"Please come, Granny." David put on his sad look.

"I can't, dear. Who will take care of Pa if I go?"

"I don't know." He looked at the floor.

"There, you see, my clever one. Your mommy would not leave you, would she?"

"No."

"David, we need to go." Ashley dried a tear running down her cheek.

"I don't want to leave Granny." He sobbed.

"Come, honey, we must go." Ashley tried to take David from her mom, but his grip around her neck was tight.

"No, no, no! I want to stay with Granny! I want to stay with Granny!"

Ashley ripped him from his grandmother's neck.

“Oh my God, Mom.” Ashley could barely see her mother’s face through the tears.

“Be safe on the roads, Ashley.” Her dad said with difficulty. He barely had the strength to talk. “Don’t stop for anything or anyone. Get my gun, Emma.”

Emma opened the nightstand drawer and lifted a Glock that had never been used.

“The ammo box, as well.” John said. “Take it, Ashley, and be safe.”

“I love you so much.” Emma put the gun and the ammo in Ashley’s purse. David was trying to break away from her. He seemed to have understood that this was a final goodbye.

She backed out of the apartment with her child kicking and screaming with sorrow for his grandparents without losing eye contact with her mother.

Ashley considered for a brief moment staying behind with her son and taking a chance with the overwhelming heat, but it was just a brief moment. She couldn’t imagine her son enduring the agony of suffocating to death or even burning. There were fires spreading all over the place, and the fire brigade had already stopped trying to contain them. The remaining water was being saved for survival purposes. Phoenix had been lost.

ON THE ROAD

"Mom, I don't want to go to aunt Esther's."

Ashley watched the heat haze in distance as it danced over the road, which looked like black water. She was thinking about how stupid it had been to not leave earlier. Every flight from Phoenix was fully booked, and, after tomorrow, there wouldn't be any more flights. There were black market tickets available, starting at ten thousands dollars. She didn't have that kind of money—her house was worthless, just like every property in Arizona. At least she hadn't been stupid enough to forget to get some gas. They would make it to Los Angeles on the tank, if they could get that far. She dreaded having to scavenge for gas. She was just lucky enough to have filled the car up the day before; people were already starting to fight over the remaining gas.

"Mom? I don't wanna go. Why do we have to go?"

Ashley turned off the evacuation message on the radio. She knew it by heart, already. They were supposed to have the radio on, in case some urgent news was to be broadcasted. Most of the residents who could evacuate were already gone, if not currently leaving, like she was. She hoped they would escape most of the traffic by going highway forty through Bakersfield.

"We have to, honey. "

"When will we go back?"

Ashley wondered if they needed more water and food for the trip. She hadn't gotten much from the local grocery store. It was vacant and the shelves had been empty when they got there. That same store had been in the news the other day: people were falling over one another, trying to get to anything they could get. Water was the most sought after. A fight broke out, and people had gotten hurt. It was quiet when she got there, but there wasn't much left.

"We won't go back."

"What about Granny and Grandpa? What about Mike?" Mike was his kindergarden friend. Best buddies, they'd called themselves.

"Mike has already left with his family, honey." She adjusted the rearview mirror so she could see the face of her son. He sat, strapped down in the children's seat, and a tear ran down his cheek. "Maybe you will see him later."

"I don't want to!" David yelled. "I want to go back to Granny."

"We talked about this, David. Everybody is leaving because it will be too hot to live in Phoenix. It's dangerous."

"I am used to hot." David looked outside the window and watched the brown color of the desert sand.

"Not this hot, honey."

"What about Granny, then?"

Ashley looked at the gasoline needle: the tank was half empty. She could only hope they wouldn't run into any trouble hunting for gas. Walking in temperatures around one hundred and sixty was lethal, they had said on the radio.

"I don't know, honey. I don't know."

EMMA AND JOHN

"Give me some water, please." John asked Emma.

She stood by the window and stared at black smoke in the distance. It started with a wildfire, the radio had said. The only thing they heard on the radio now was the evacuation message. It was around noon, and the temperature was already up to one hundred and thirty degrees. The heat wave was supposed to peak around four or five in the afternoon. If the electricity would stay up, they might make it, as they had pretty good air conditioning. She could hear it hum as it blew cold air into the house.

"Emma?"

"Yes, dear." She turned to John and put on a smile.

"Water. I am thirsty." He tried to rearrange himself on the bed, but was without luck, as his bone-bare limbs did not have the strength to hold up his body.

"Do you want something else from the kitchen?"

"No, water is fine." He lay down on the pillow and moaned in agony. "Maybe it's time for the shot. I can feel the pain coming again."

Emma nodded and went into the kitchen. She opened the fridge, which was filled with canned food and water bottles. She didn't know how long they would last. Maybe she should have gone with her daughter.

"Emma, please hurry." He called. She heard the pain in his voice.

No, she couldn't leave him. She wouldn't leave him. She opened the medicine cabinet and took out a syringe and a small glass with a label that said *Morphine*.

BAKERSFIELD

The gas needle was touching the red bar at the bottom. They were not far away from the city of Bakersfield.

"Are we there, yet?" David asked.

"At Aunt Esther's? No, not yet. We have a long way to go, honey."

"I want to call Granny."

"Sure, at the next stop. We are almost there. What's that?" She peered to make out the black figure on the road ahead. It looked like it was swaying in the heat haze. They had already past few dozen cars that had probably run out of cooling water. Many of the car owners and their families had still been around their car, hoping for help, but she couldn't offer any. She wouldn't offer any. "Don't stop for anyone or anything," her dad had said. She doubted his words when she drove past a woman with two kids strapped in car seats in the back. She had slowed down, as the woman had been on her knees in the middle of the road in the stifling one hundred and forty degrees, pleading to her oncoming car to stop. Her kids looked like they were asleep in the back seat. She didn't stop.

"I want to call her now." David was starting to whine.

"Wait. There is something on the road." When they came nearer, she saw that it was a man waving his hands in the air. A Chevrolet with the trunk open was on the side of the road. The man seemed to have a sweater or a tee-shirt curled up on his head to shelter him from the heat.

The man was in the middle of the road, and she was getting closer each second. She would have to stop eventually or run him over. She could see white smoke coming from the hood of the Chevrolet. She slowed down, watching the hazy figure of a man waving his hands. She could see his face, now. He was smiling and saying something. Ashley stopped the car.

"Who is that man, Mommy?"

"I don't know." She pressed the central lock button and rolled down the window just a little. The man was walking slowly toward her with his hands in front of him, like he was trying to calm an anxious horse. She could hear him, now.

"I need your help." He was still smiling and was now right in front of her car. "I just need a ride to Bakersfield to get my car fixed. It looks like you've got room."

"Sorry, I can't. I have my son here, and I need to go. Please move." Ashley put the car in gear and started to move.

"Easy. It is awfully hot out here. I will need you to drive me." He positioned himself directly in front of the car. Then he put his hand behind his back and drew a gun on her.

"Now, get out of the car." His smile was gone.

Ashley remembered the gun her father had given her, but it was too late for that. She put the car in reverse, ducked, pressed the gas pedal to the floor, and backed away from the stranger.

She heard the gun go off and the bullet tore through the car's glass and fiber. She braked and David screamed.

"Mommy, I'm scared."

Ashley lifted her head and looked at the man through the bullet hole in her windshield. She put the car in drive and felt the front wheels spin on the hot tarmac when she pressed the gas pedal to the floor.

The man with the sweater on his head aimed again.

"Get your head down, David!" Ashley screamed, and she ducked her head down to the passenger side.

David screamed in terror.

Another loud bang filled the quiet desert. Ashley could feel pieces of glass hit her face.

“David!” She screamed. Then she heard a loud thump, the squealing of metal bending, and the cracking sound of both glass and bones breaking. She sat up and looked in the rearview mirror. The stranger rolled along the road and stopped, face-down. There were now two bullet holes in the windshield.

“David?” She turned to look at her son.

PHOENIX ON FIRE

The night light on the nightstand beside John suddenly turned off. The hum from the air conditioner died out. A thick silence replaced it. Emma stood up from the chair and tried to turn on the light, without any luck. The electricity was out. The heat was peaking now, just as the forecast had said.

“How hot is it?” John asked.

“John, I don’t know. It doesn’t help to know.” She looked at the dark curtains that kept the sunlight from piercing its hot rays through the window.

“I’m just thinking about Ashley. Maybe it’s cooler up north. Maybe they will make it.” He sounded weak and started coughing.

“How’s the pain?” Emma wondered if she should get him more water.

“Absent, for now.” He coughed some more, and Emma watched him wipe blood from his lips.

“I’ll get you some water.” She left the room and headed toward the kitchen. She didn’t want to look at him like that, coughing up blood. Better to be doing something. The thermometer was just by the window and its numbers frightened her. It showed one hundred and sixty three degrees. The other thing that caught her eye was even more disturbing. She saw birds on the road, lying still on the hot tarmac. If she wasn’t mistaken, steam was rising from them. Emma was startled when another bird dropped in her garden, right in front of her eyes. It was an eagle. His white head was now dark red and broken. She could see the tongues of fire licking at the roofs in her neighborhood. People were yelling behind one of the houses. How long would it be until the fire spread to them? How long until the remaining cool air in the house started to get warmer? She could already see the condensation forming on the windows. She pulled the curtains closed and the room went dark. Emma stood in front of the fridge, wondering if she should say anything to John.

“How is it?” He asked when she came back with a damp cloth and a bottle of water.

“It’s like it was when we got married, dear: nice and cozy. Remember our wedding ceremony, when we had to open all the windows in the church? And the preacher,” Emma laughed, “When he said ,for better or for worse.’ We didn’t expect this, did we?” She put the wet cloth on his forehead.

“I guess not.” John tried to laugh, but it ended with a cough that seemed to never end.

The mobile rang with a happy song from a cartoon that she had put on when she had babysat David.

“Maybe it’s Ashley. You should have gone with her.”

Emma disregarded his comment and answered the phone. “Emma.” She always answered with her first name.

“Hi, Sis.” It was Esther.

“Esther, are Ashley and David there already?”

“No, that’s why I am calling. I can’t get through to them. She isn’t answering the phone.”

“Maybe it’s out of reach. You know the signal can be bad.”

“Who is it? Is it Ashley?” John tried to sit up. Emma lifted her hand to signal for him to wait.

“I was going to call her. Maybe I can get through.” Emma said.

“If you do, tell her that we are evacuating San Francisco, as well.”

“What?”

“They said it would be okay, but it isn’t. “ Esther started to sob over the phone.

“What happened?” Emma still had her hand up, signaling John to not disturb the call.

“There is a storm coming. They say that the city will go under. I’m scared, Sis.”

Emma knew all too well about the rise of the sea level, as it had been in the news for the past

year and a half. The people on the coasts were trying to barricade them from flooding. The coming storm would flood the city for sure.

"It's going to be alright, Esther. Where will you go?" Emma needed desperately to get in touch with her daughter, who was heading straight to death without knowing it. "Is it broadcasted on the emergency frequency?"

"I don't know, Emma, but there are buses and taxis driving people inland. Maybe Reno or Sacramento."

"I need to know where you are going, Esther, so I can tell Ashley. She is all alone with David, you know."

"I know. I'm sorry. Tell her," Esther hesitated. "Tell her to come to Reno. I will be there, in one of the shelters. I need to go, Sis."

"Take care, Esther. And please, try to call Ashley. She might just be out of range. Send her a message: Facebook, email—whatever. I'll try to call her now."

"I'll do that, I promise." Her sobbing had turned into crying.

"I love you." Emma said. "Take care of them for me."

"I will."

"What's going on? Where is Esther going?" John had actually managed to sit up in the bed, and he waited anxiously for the news.

"We need to warn Ashley." Emma dialed the number to her daughter's mobile.

THE MAN ON THE ROAD

“David!” Ashley stopped the car with so much force that the tires locked and painted black stripes on the road. The screeching sound from the tires underlined her urgency. Loose things had gotten thrown around in the car. Her phone, which was in the passenger seat, struck the glove compartment and hit the floor.

David was covering his face with his hands.

“David, are you okay?” He didn’t move.

Ashley looked in the rearview mirror. The man still lay on the road, face-down. She took off her seat belt and reached for David.

“David, talk to me.”

“I’m sorry, Mommy.” He said. His eyes were filled with tears, which trickled down his cheeks. He was shaking and could barely breathe.

Ashley was now on her knees in the driver seat, reaching for her son to see if he was hurt. The second bullet hole through the rear window told her that he was fine, physically.

“Sorry? You don’t have to be sorry, honey.” She wanted to hug him and hold onto him for dear life, but that meant she had to get out of the car and possibly lose the cool air. “You don’t have to be sorry.”

“Is he dead?”

“Who?”

“That man we hit.”

“I don’t know, dear.”

“I think we should call an ambulance.” David said, with tears still running down his face.

“I think so, too, but there aren’t any.”

“Why was he shooting at us?”

Ashley wanted to continue the trip as soon as possible, but she tried to stay calm, even though she, herself, was in a state of shock.

“I think he wanted to have our car.”

“But there’s room. We could have given him a lift.”

Ashley looked down. “That’s what Mommy was going to do, but that man was bad, you see? He was bad. He wanted to take away our car.” She looked up at David again, believing in what she had said.

“I wanna call Granny.”

“You can call Granny, but don’t tell her about this.”

“Why?”

“Because it will make her feel bad. We don’t want to make Granny feel bad, would we?”

“No.”

Ashley reached for the mobile phone on the floor. It had turned off in self-defence. She turned it on and picked her mom on the dialing list. She looked through the rear window when she handed David the phone: the man was gone.

Ashley turned in her seat, and the man, pouring with sweat, was just beside her car. He touched the window with his right hand. She thought she could hear him say “please.” She put the car in gear and drove off.

The man in the mirror got smaller and smaller until he disappeared.

MISSED CALLS

The mobile rang in Emma's hand. It was playing its joyful cartoon song and vibrating now and again, until it fell to the floor. Twenty new voice messages read on the display.

Emma and John lay still in the bed, hand in hand. They would have looked like they were sleeping, if it wasn't for the empty Morphine glass on the nightstand, and the syringe in Emma's arm. John still had the cloth on his head, which was now dry. Smoke snuck its way from the air vent into the room.

A text message appeared on the mobile phone:

"Going to Reno to meet Aunt Esther. There is a storm coming."