

Sticker

On the second floor of Arizona's Game and Fish Office Madeline stewed over a growing thought. A notion unrelated to the appointment she never rescheduled or the latest batch of ill news from the Coconino National Forest. It wasn't over the rising stacks of hunting applications she had yet to process either. It was over something so contrary to her own nature to think on, she found herself entirely unable to beat it back. She was far more practiced in avoiding the cyclical day to day thoughts that might threaten her mind than she was at banishing the absurd fantasy that now swam within it.

She mulled over this slow forming idea as her eyes searched the shared office floor. They gazed over the elk, coyote, and lake-filled canyon posters strewn about the walls of the office. Each of them conveying with pie charts, line graphs, and percentages the populations and water levels over time. To Madeline these numbers did not paint a promising picture of the twenty-fifth year of the twenty-first century. For what it painted of the future, she knew better than to think on it.

She peered over the heads and desks of those working here and her eyes rested on the new coffee machine whose full pot sat unattended. *Maybe that will work*, Madeline thought, and it wasn't long before Thomas, another Game and Fish employee whose role here still remained a curiosity to her, had gotten up to make his fourth and final cup of the day.

She knew he was a leftover from the Flagstaff headquarters of Coconino. Back from when the Arizona state government, after seeing the crisis of Coconino's shrinking border, decided to pivot the Game and Fish offices into a more defensive role so that they could curb all that endangered the citizens of the forest as well as the forest itself.

This push was one of the sparks Madeline needed to come out of retirement. Though Madeline found a canyon of difference between what the state government had said and what they did. What they did do was defund and consolidate the National State Parks into the Game and Fish offices. Meaning they closed the in-park headquarters of the largest forest of the state so that Madeline, on top of her normal workload, now monitored the Coconino live feeds from Phoenix, one hundred miles south of Coconino.

These camera feeds had been set up along the elk migration corridors of Coconino only a few years back. They had been set up during which time the Game and Fish department had been approved to send out five thousand hunting permits a year up until now where the maximum allowance had been set to one hundred and fifty and Madeline had yet to approve a single one.

The other spark was that her husband had resigned from the very same position she now held. She had the degree, the experience, and the connections required for the job. She was also the only one capable of reading her husband's undecipherable methods of recording the thousands of pending and incoming applications. Madeline understood it well because she designed that method. She wrote the software and she had written it to be confusing, difficult, and so unwieldy that none but herself and her husband could use it.

Madeline in her time here finished the path she had laid out for her husband during his time here by continuing to convert these documents into her own shorthand style that none but herself could read. Then, after all the physical applications had been recycled, she would delete all digital records and all methods of bringing back said records.

Her age being what it was, meant that there was no suspicion that this had been done with ill intent, and the computer system here, being old as it was, meant that there were no methods of retrieval and it also made for a great excuse should anyone ever come asking.

Thomas pigeon-toed past the hanging frames of dark evergreen-speared forests, red-sunned meadows, and snow-peaked mountains of the massively diverse Coconino landscape of old before passing a framed rotted tree with crooked limbs contained within the parking-lot view of the north facing window. He reached out for the handle and the pot refused him.

He tried once more and the entire machine lurched forward, forcing Thomas with his spare hand to hold the machine down for leverage. The coffee swirled and spilled as he tried twisting and pulling the glass pot free.

Thomas never noticed Madeline in the same way the rest of the office never noticed Thomas's coffee machine antics. Madeline noticed. Her hands clenched and her breath held as the dim light of comprehension began to churn the waters of her mind. Her eyes were wide open beneath her gold wire-rimmed glasses as Thomas positioned himself for one good yank in a last-ditch coffee pot pull.

Glass shattered and coffee splashed over the counter. It spilled across the white tiles and every head on the floor turned to look at the pink-faced Thomas and the brand-new coffee pot he had just broken. The spreading lake of coffee hit the grey carpet floor as Thomas scrambled for the paper towels.

"You need to pour the coffee into a cup first." A co-worker shouted in jest, adding nothing to Thomas's frantic attempts to contain the spill. Others looked in annoyance at the disturbance to their workflow and the return of the threat the absence of a working brewer meant to their mornings.

For Thomas, it was an embarrassing day that would forever mark his journeys to the office kitchen. For Madeline, it was something else entirely.

Madeline had hoped that the coffee pot would be stuck to the machine before Thomas reached for it and then it happened. Madeline didn't know what to think so she surveyed the spreading stain and took a deep breath to let her mind catch up with her heart as the dark roast filled the office air and the clatters of the keyboard returned; drowning out further away conversations.

Then those clatters turned to silence the moment Madeline came up with a new test and then she knew it was no coincidence. Everyone in her view looked down to the stuck keys below their fingertips and there was a discomfoting silence as they began to look to each other in bewilderment.

The clatter started back up as Madeline thought to undo it. She watched as a few of her colleagues began to ask around, trying to confirm with others their own experience though there never would be any conversation among them that could ever explain what had truly happened when Madeline thought the thought to keep every pressed key to the keyboard.

Even Madeline couldn't explain it. To uncover that something like this was possible was like nothing else. Nothing she'd ever felt before. The surge of adrenalin mixed with her inner arguments of denial and her thoughts began to weave themselves into knots. When her stomach followed suit, she reached into her large handbag for the lukewarm ginger ale she kept on hand for moments her nerves threatened to get ahead of her and she pulled the tab.

She knew there was no real ginger in the drink, but when it came to the long-engrained placebos of her childhood, she always found that as long as she could catch the feeling she could catch the wave.

"How's the work coming along?" Demetri, the Coconino Ranger turned office manager asked.

“I was just getting to the,” she looked around the office, “just about to get some coffee.”

“You sure you need coffee right now?” he said with wrinkled concern as he looked to the can in her hand.

“Maybe not.” Madeline pointed to one of the security feeds on her desk, “but I wanted to ask, why do the trail cameras keep getting moved?” She asked his tinderbox question, knowing he could talk for days on the matter if given the proper motivation. She rifled through her handbag as he started up.

“...had to move them or take them down.” He spoke while looking at the monitors on Madeline’s desk. “I don’t agree with it either, but it’s been bringing a lot of attention on us and in these days, attention means criticism, and criticism means defunding then firings. They don’t send journalists to see the good or talk about what still needs to be done. In fact, just today I was told one would be,” he checked his phone again, “sorry. It’s up to the people who write our checks and they would rather shut the whole thing down over dealing with the tumbleweeds like us that roll out when the bad news rolls in. They might have to think of a good answer to the questions we’ve been asking them and you and Tinn know better than I do how they hate having to think about things. In fact, it’s better they don’t think about us at all. Right now, the danger in being in the minds of the stupid far outweigh the risk of keeping those cameras off the migration trails. The attention brought on us by those Coconino wackadoos when they started blowing out their,” Alicia, a nearby listener, turned from her desk, “Alicia don’t laugh at that, it’s true and you know it. As soon as all this nonsense blows over, we’ll turn the cameras back to the corridors.”

“I see.” Madeline closed her handbag. “Sorry to cut you short, but I’m stopping by the market on the way home. It’s my turn to get Tinn’s card among a few other things.”

“Tell Tinn we miss him. Shout it at him if you have to.” Demetri called out as she made her way out the office. Madeline felt a sudden sickness overtake the ginger when he had brought up those Coconino hunters. The ones that in some way or another led Madeline to think the ridiculous coffee pot thought. The hunters whose deaths had been deemed suicide, until it happened again and again to other hunters in the same park. But in awe of what Madeline was uncovering, that was a dark piece of the puzzle far too heavy for her mind to mull in the moment.

Madeline had plenty else to think about as she sporadically sped over the crosswalks of Phoenix, the well sunned capital of Arizona, towards the Valley Metro Rail. The heat was a shimmering haze stuck to the streets ahead of her as she tested her newfound way of thinking by sticking shoes to the street, fingers to crosswalk buttons, doors to the tall buildings that towered over the foot traffic and to her own delight she had even caught a finger as it entered its owners nose.

Though Madeline was an expert at keeping a straight face, the quickly widened eyes of horror on the face of the stranger who momentarily found their nose picking finger unable to make the journey back out had Madeline chuckling as she walked between the shade of the buildings.

She took her seat in the light rail cabin and the air conditioner rattled though no cold air had ever come out of it on any of Madeline’s prior commutes. The other passengers fanned themselves with what they could while the magnetic rails began to move them.

Glazed with sweat like every other passenger, Madeline looked around for another test and her eyes caught a Science Today magazine being held in the hands of a well-postured and

well-dressed man across from her. He was nose deep in its pages and Madeline watched his eyebrows turn from stern and focused to perplexed then back to stern a few times before she decided on another test.

Instead of hitting surprised, he went back to stern, which then led his eyebrows to frustration as he turned the two pages Madeline had stuck and found that the page in between could not be seen.

He licked his fingers to better flip the pages. He gave a closer look to the seams for evidence of torn-out pages and his face shrank with uneasy worryment when he found none. He closed the magazine in an attempt to loosen it, tried flipping through the entire magazine at once but only got a single flop and slap of the magazine hitting his hand for Madeline had wanted to see in that moment if she could stick all the pages at once. His frustrated brows turned to a look of disgust.

Or was that fear? Madeline wondered as he turned the magazine over.

Among the humor in seeing these struggles unfold was a fascination into seeing how one deals with the absurd dilemma's she can now create. To watch this man's nose flare and his forehead wrinkle as he struggled with the bound pages of his magazine brought Madeline a great deal of satisfaction.

Her day of discovery was consolidating well within her as the day for the man with the magazine had taken a demonic tilt into unknown territories. He hunched over the magazine, searching, but finding nothing that could explain the phenomenon that he was now picking and scratching at. He rolled it, unrolled it, tried twisting it and he even gave it a smell.

His focus was entirely on the magazine that was now more slab than editorial as he missed his stop and the next one. The mystery overwhelmed him and all that he had scheduled for himself.

He searched with hope for a set of mischievous eyes that might make sense of what he held in his hands and it was then that the magazine fell limp. His head jerked down. His glasses slipped right to the end of his nose. He felt the weight of the magazine shift when all the pages had been freed for turning. His eyes cantered pleadingly from the magazine to any onlookers. He even met eyes with Madeline but saw nothing in her passive face to indicate her having any hand in this. He cursed and stepped out at the next stop while using the magazine to shade his face from the sun.

As he disembarked, another group of overheated people came aboard to settle among the remaining seats and standing bars. Madeline suddenly remembered the card she had meant to get at the market as the doors to the store exit hissed shut. Her regret vanished after sticking the boot of a traveler a few seats down who, despite the severe heat, wore a blue buckle-tucked long-sleeve shirt. It only took a few moments for the cowboy to shift and notice something awry.

Rather than pull and kick and struggle like the other people Madeline had pulled this same stunt on, this man rotated his knee around, as though he were trying to figure out the source of the disturbance before acting. Then his knee came straight up and as a cork gets pulled from a bottle of wine his pink sweat-covered foot had freed itself with a sloshing pop.

A damp air rose from the dark hole of the boot that had been stewing his naked foot. Madeline was sickened by the sight and smell. Others were quick to anger and open displays of

disgust once the rot smell reached them. The sour fumes that emanated from the open boot were so poignant and so tart that the dry stuffy heat had turned humid.

“Why aren’t you wearing socks?” Madeline asked him. Her patience and curiosity outweighed her disgust.

“You don’t wear socks in cowboy boots,” he responded while trying to pull his boot off the floor. Oblivious of what his boot wearing habits had festered in those around him.

“I’m not sure where you learned that, but I can tell you for your own health, you really should.” One passenger joined in.

“You should be keeping your feet dry in there, you’ll get something bad,” said another.

“It’s sick,” another woman shouted out. Her patience failing her as she wore the face of one gauging how far they could spit.

Madeline inched away from the man. *The sidewalks are oven hot out there. Who in their right mind could bear to walk around like that?* She found herself angry at the man too. *It’s disgusting*, she thought, though she would never say anything so pointed.

“Put it back on” was shouted and the people sitting near him had gotten up to move as far as they could while Madeline, alongside everyone else, watched the man reach down once more to pick his boot off the ground.

Madeline unstuck the boot the moment before. But rather than plugging the hole with his foot as she had meant for him to do, he lifted then tilted the boot with his hand, pouring a thin stream that sent the entire cabin into a frenzy.

The rubber tiled floors of the rail absorbed none of it. Every eye watched the creeping puddle as though it were a lit fuse.

“You’re disgusting,” someone shouted as the man slipping his sweat-slicked foot back into his boot. He chuckled through the escalating shouts and insults.

The doors hissed open and Madeline with her breath held evacuated with every other traveler. She considered how responsible she was for the madness that boot had stirred in the other riders and herself during her short walk home but to hold any thought for long with what was swimming through her mind was beyond her capability.

Scatterbrained, she entered her homely apartment where written cards of sentiment between herself and her husband of forty years had accrued and turned the walls around her into murals of mismatched colored squares. The walls were hideous, but what she gained while letting herself get pulled into the words written within them after a grim day of work far outweighed the pain of a distant aesthetic.

There were many cards and written within them were many days she could not remember offhand. Today, she did not go to the cards. She only noticed the empty space on the wall that had been meant for today’s card and thought, *I don’t think he’ll miss this week’s card in light of what he is about to find out,*

Madeline skipped right to turning on the local news and was surprised to see the bright sun highlighting the sweat on Demetri’s face as the reporter from under her umbrella interrupted his sentence.

“Does Game and Fish still maintain that these deaths were due to weapon malfunctions, therefore it is on the Winston’s firearms to take responsibility?”

“No, and we never did.” He held his hand up to shade his eyes. “At one point, we had guessed that the cause of the backfiring rifles was due to the temperature and moisture levels

varying between the different park elevations and had they been kept the rifle pre-loaded prior to taking it to Coconino, the ammo casings may have expanded. Resulting in those deaths. It was a running theory at the time and so,” Madeline grew concerned, “we asked the weapon manufacturer privately if they’ve ever seen anything like this so we could let the authorities know and they responded with a public defamation suit, though the first we heard of it was when they announced it on the news and on their social media accounts.”

“So, it is true you contacted the weapon manufacturer’s in accusation?”

He gave a frustrated laugh “I did not accuse them.” Madeline could see the itch to discuss this further grow over his face. He had been ranting around the office about the Winston Rifle company’s shameless attempts to attach themselves to the Coconino mystery in any way they could by shaming the Game and Fish offices for what was happening in the state.

“If they wanted to stop this campaign, or whatever it is they are doing by putting down all the good people here who are only trying preserve the last remaining pieces of our forests then I would love to talk to them and I’d be happy to apologize if what I said bothered them. As it stands now, when it comes to the Coconino deaths, I would implore them to speak with the authorities. We are not investigating this. We are only here to—”

“Now for the live reaction from Rex, media consultant for Winston Firearms to the Game and Fish accusations that have been hurled your way. What do you have to say Rex?”

Rex appeared on screen and a practiced white-toothed grin spread over his studio lit face. The crescent grin vanished before he could speak and his face writhed. He pounded a fist on the table.

“My teeth are stuck” He said, and he looked foolish saying it.

This works through the television too. Madeline had made it so anytime he spoke with dishonest intent he would find his teeth bound and it worked. *With intent too,* Madeline thought with a big smile as the reporter came back on.

“We too are stunned by these accusations.” She said.

I wonder how far this can go, Madeline wondered, then she began to think about how she might help curb Winston’s behavior for the role they had taken after those hunters had died. *All because Game and Fish reached out to them. All because Game and Fish had entered their thoughts. Using those deaths as their platform and Game and Fish as the punching bag.*

Madeline’s slow-built vendetta incorporated Winston into it, and while on route to set the kettle and warm her leftovers she came up with an answer. She stuck the bullet to the chamber of every loaded firearm Winston made or ever will make.

Madeline was unable to ride the peak of the karmic wave forming within her as she had suddenly solved the five deaths at the heart of the Coconino mystery.

It was me. I almost did it again. Just now. I was right in the act. This time for a completely different reason, if that matters.

She tried to remember the Coconino thought that would have done it. *Was it when I saw the first of the hunters? Or had it been earlier that day?*

Of course, had I known then that a thought of mine could do what it did, I know I would’ve thought of something far more creative and far less violent. She set the kettle and set the dish in the microwave. *I certainly didn’t want what did happen to happen.*

She rubbed her hands, trying to pacify her sinking stomach. *I know nothing about the inner workings of a rifle. Let alone enough to make their rifles paint their wielders over the rocks, trees, and cacti of Coconino as they did.* She was pacing now, considering.

How accountable am I for one thought among millions escaping me in such a way?

Now that I know, of course I can lift it. I can make sure to stop any stray thought that might do that again as well. If a stray thought is something that can be stopped.

If anything, they are lucky it was my stray thought on those elk. Rather than, she searched the tea cupboards, rather than all other unremembered thoughts that have been going through my mind.

Who knows what thought did it, and if anyone did know, who could ever say where it came from?

She gave up on remembering the thought as the microwave timer hit zero and like with all retained memories that have not been wiped clean by time but are in that space where they cannot be recalled, it was only when she admitted the culprit thought was lost for good did the memory of it surface.

She had had been looking at the new office posters. Mulling the freefall of the elk and wondering what could be done now that there were no longer the funds to remove the dead fish from the shrinking lakes before their decomposition could ruin the waters all life in Coconino relied on.

The death of those fish had already turned the once a year elk migration into an eight-month circling of Coconino in their search for water. It had been a particularly upsetting day as it was at that time, that she had also heard the news of the end of the gray fox, her favorite animal.

It was then too, while thinking about the stuffed fox she had as a child, and looking at those elk, that she had that fantastic and absurd thought.

It was the kill-shot and it was to the barrel. Just like what I almost did a few minutes ago.

She reached into the fridge. But had their bullets hit true, they might've hit an elk still tending to her offspring, or some pregnant doe unaware of the stalker hiding in the dirt and brush. Or maybe, maybe they were aiming for a father, or father to be. Maybe, she thought, they were aiming for the offspring,

She closed the fridge and turned to the quilt of cards on the wall.

If it was given to me to do what I did then, then the expectation very well could be to continue and what's five out of a however many billions compared to extinction?

With that, Madeline changed the Coconino thought to only stick the triggers, rather than the bullets and like before there was no indication, confirmation or anything at all to let her know that Coconino was protected.

Whether it had worked or not, made no difference to the relief that swept through her. It was powerful and it felt as though every thought that had ever frustrated her nights and forcefully set her moods had all been swept clean by the wave in her mind that was now within her power to control, to use, and to set forth into the world. She wiped her eyes as she approached the empty space on the wall meant for her card.

This is it. Now that rules can be set and manners unignored the world might no longer skirt so disrespectfully close to the end of the Holocene. The world might no longer have a trigger to pull if I can do this to every single trigger world over. It wouldn't more than a single thought. If this works like I think this does.

She looked around the room, imagining the looks on all the faces with the eyes to kill and to take what was never theirs to take.

The walls really are ugly, she thought. She saw the time on the clock swimming between the cards that now looked so unorganized. I really ought to straighten all these out. I won't even need to use tacks anymore.

She imagined telling Tinn, and she imagined the ridiculous conversations they would be having about her discovery and she couldn't wait to bounce her ideas, thoughts, and concerns on the use of this power off of each other. On how their lives, and the future might be changed for the better.

Heart valves, eyelids, teeth. Anyone who means harm. Oh, and the perverts of course. They can be stuck to their underwear from now on. I think that would help. Polluters, violence doers, who needs them? I don't want to kill them or anything, but maybe there could be, she began to pace, there could be something for those who let Game and Fish come to this point. Oh boy are they going to get it now. They never did tell anyone where that money went. I wonder if I could stick their sphi—.

The sound of door unlocking startled Madeline, and she turned to see Tinn entering the room with a kind smile.

“I think I found the solution to a good number of problems today.” She said, knowing his deaf ears couldn't hear a single thing. Tinn had lost his hearing more than a few years ago and he also found a great deal of comfort in the words written in the cards on the walls.

If I could stick my words to your hearing, her thoughts trailed off wistfully and she could hear in her mind his cane tapping frantically on the bamboo tiled floors as he raced his tears to reach for her hands.

“I can hear your voice. Your sweet beautiful voice,” he would say, and they would walk under the wall of cards so that he could unpin the cards that meant most while asking her to read them aloud. Tinn would cry as Madeline knew that even in his old age he had never learned how to hold the water in his eyes and she knew that it was one thing to read those words and another thing entirely to hear those very same words read aloud by their creator.

Excited for the time they would soon spend together deciding how the world would now be she wrote on the small whiteboard the words; *I've got something to tell you.*