

To
S L E E P
as
A N I M A L S

by

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AN EXCERPT FROM
CHAPTER 2

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THE THIN TRICKLE of creek dries up about a hundred feet east of the fence line. Ben follows the cracked-mud rut until even that seems to fade into the brown, shivering grass. He doesn't see the geochemist anywhere. He keeps walking. A little further along, under a small copse of madman-looking trees, Ben stands in the shade and the sudden wind whipping down from the mountains, lets the wind have its way with his clothes and with his hair. He considers leaning in the shadows

under a tree and closing his eyes, letting the time slip by until he has something to do, but eventually a husky figure wearing what looks like a fishing vest comes tromping out of the grass and into the shaded copse.

“I imagine you’re Mr. Nigra.” Beneath the shading brim of his sun hat, the man is bearded and squint-eyed. He speaks with the faintest hint of a British accent. Ben immediately determines: it’s an affectation. “I was wondering when you’d show up. If you’d show at all.”

“Believe it or not, I was on time.” Ben lets a deliberate moment pass before offering his hand. “I was told you’d be at your office.”

Hanover looks at Ben’s extended hand but makes no effort to take it. “That’s a pretty stupid thing to have been told, Mr. Nigra. It is Mister, right?”

“Right.”

“Not doctor.”

“Right.”

Hanover smiles humorlessly. “You’ll have to forgive me, but being a scientist, a man of exacting and exact knowledge, I have to ask: is it *Nye-gra* or *Nee-gra*?”

“The first one.”

“I suppose it doesn’t matter, really,” and the geochemist laughs. “The meaning’s the same no matter how you say it.”

And now it’s Ben’s turn to smile without humor. “In a particular instance, Nigra can

actually mean ‘Austrian,’ but as fascinating as my name might be, I’m actually here to learn more about what you do.”

This dialogue, he notes, is not starting off well.

“If you’d been here an hour or so ago, I could have shown you firsthand. As it is, you’ll have to settle for a summary. Come along.” Like a school-marm or minister, Hanover walks away with his hands clasped behind his back, his strides long and purposeful. Half-tempted to call the whole meeting off, to begin a new line of inquiry, Ben silently follows.

As they get closer to the highway, the grasses thin out to hardpan and large stones and more of that same wiry brush that flourished throughout the reservoir canyon. Far ahead alongside the highway, some sort of dome or quonset facility stands amid a crown of fishhook street lamps and somewhere in between, among the grasses and the brush: cows, grazing.

Keeping a purposeful distance ahead, the geo-chemist explains the various histories of this site in an intentional, opaque jargon that Ben understands is meant to confuse him, make him feel inferior. Most of this, he simply ignores, choosing instead to watch the brush shiver in the breeze, scrutinizing the spaces between stones for darting rabbits or fox or quail, waiting for the geochemist to talk

himself out. Eventually, Hanover explains the settlement of the area. How gold and silver ore extracted from the Comstock Lode were reduced to pure metals at this and other mill sites in the region. How mercury was a major component in the reduction process. How none of the various techniques were terribly efficient. “Ridiculous amounts of gold and silver were washed away in the creek. And, of course, plenty of mercury, too.” The creek, Hanover assures him, was once much more than it is now.

On the highway, the driver of a Mack truck pulls the cable for his horn and keeps it pulled as it roars by, its ongoing blat trumpeting down and fading as it goes. The geochemist stops in his tracks to watch the truck go by, something like boyhood hurt or wonder filling his thick, squinting eyes. Ben studies the man, waiting. In a moment, Hanover tromps on through the grass.

Some ten years ago, the geochemist continues, a study had been conducted—here and at the other abandoned mills—to determine the sources of the unusually-high levels of mercury found in Washoe Lake and other waterways in the county—“Which is to say, Mr. Nigra, mercury found in all the drinking water in the region”—wherein it was concluded that, in conjunction with the overall rise of industry, residual mercury from

over a hundred years ago was still leaching into the groundwater.

“So what are you doing out here now?” Above them, the sun stares down merciless and unblinking, boiling the sweat from his skin, but somehow Ben doesn’t seem to mind. He almost likes the heat. “If your predecessors figured this out already, why are you still taking samples?”

“Because, Mr. Nigra, mercury levels have been rising. One would expect them to diminish over time.”

“And you think somehow more is leaching from this site than before?”

“It is possible. Seismic activity could release large, previously dormant caches, for example.”

“But you don’t think that’s the case.” Ben stops, waits for Hanover to do the same. “Do you?” But the geochemist keeps walking, weaving his way between the stones, and Ben suddenly realizes that Hanover isn’t leading him anywhere, is simply wandering through a grassy expanse while the roar of the highway grows closer and closer.

It occurs to Ben that this man is a useless cog in an outdated academic machine. Making work for himself by reopening closed cases. Chasing dead ends. Doing nothing and getting paid.

“Why are you out here, Mr. Nigra?” Hanover takes off his sun-hat, mops the

sunburnt dome of his bald scalp with a handkerchief. “This isn’t your professional interest. This isn’t even tangentially related to what you do back wherever it is you come from. So why are you here?”

“Why did the mill close down?”

“What?”

“The Ophir Mill. Why’d it close down?”
Up ahead. Hanover finally stops, slowly turns in his tracks while Ben continues to speak. “People worked here and lived here and now they’re all gone. Was it because they’d poisoned their water with mercury?”

“At that time, they didn’t know it was poison.”

Something between disgust and amazement seems to be shaping the geochemist’s face, but from so far away, Ben can’t be sure.

“So then what happened that made everyone pack up and leave?”

“Wh—what *happened*? The twentieth century happened. Are you for real, sir?” Hanover retraces his steps, brings himself within easy arm’s reach of Ben. “The American West is full of places that no longer serve a purpose so have been left behind. It’s how this country copes with old age.”

“And that,” Ben says, “is exactly why I’m here.”

“I do not follow you, sir.”

“Don’t you think the people here fought to keep what they had?”

“If they really wanted it so bad, Mr. Nigra, they’d still have it.” The crease in his brow is a fissure down a mountain face, his mouth’s smug set dissolving. “What are you after, Mr. Nigra? You come out here with the university’s compliance and aid to pester me with questions more appropriate to a historian or a—a *librarian*. A fifth-grade schoolteacher would be a better interviewee than I would. Yet here you are tramping through my lab and wasting my time with this foolishness. So why are you here? Why are you bothering me with these questions?”

Then: “What are you trying to drag me into, Mr. Nigra?”

Ben casts his face into the shape of long-suffering patience and waits for this tantrum to play itself out, but with a sudden flicker—like a series of frames badly edited from a film—he feels as though some time has passed. Both men stand just as they had a moment before, but somehow the light is different, a cloud is moving across the sun and Hanover is demanding that Ben repeat what he just said, asking why he’d say such a thing, though as far as Ben can recall, he hasn’t spoken a word.

Finally, his temper exhausted, the geochemist says, “I think you might have gotten your Ophir Mills mixed up, sir. There’s another one, about a hundred miles east of

here. If it's ghost towns you're after, Mr. Nigra, that's the one you want. Lots of ruins and mysterious intrigue. Now I'm done being polite here. I'm done talking to you altogether." Hanover turns and heads back into the rocky plain, purposeful and quick in his stride. Ben watches him go, then turns back the way he came.

Over the sound of the highway, over his shoulder, Ben thinks he hears once more, "If it's ghost towns you're after..." but the rest is lost in the wind or was maybe never said.

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