

The man had been driving east on the strange road for days now and he had still not seen a car since leaving Fresno. He looked at the odometer for the hundredth time but the mileage had not changed. The fuel-gauge needle was twitching just below empty but this did not worry him anymore. His friend had suggested that they take Highway 198 through the Sequoia National Park in hopes of seeing a Zybatrix tree but this proved to be a mistake, since those life forms only grew further south, in the desert.

It was a terrible drive up the steep grade and the switchbacks eventually made his neck tense up like a vise. Not only that, but he began to feel a dry heat slowly kindle at the base of his spine. It was a small brush fire at first but with each passing mile, his vertebrae felt more like lumps of ignited anthracite. He imagined looking like an incandescent string of Christmas lights, glowing red and white in the dark confines of the car. By the time the blaze reached his head, it no longer bothered him but his friend was backed up against the door, wearing an expression of ghastly fright on his face. His eyes were pure white pearls, bouncing around unevenly in the passenger seat. It looked as if they were guiding someone through the words of a children's song on television. The man was just about to comment on the humor of this when his friend bent forward, the pearls rising up into his skull, and violently jerked his head backward into the window. The glass shattered upon impact and suddenly the man felt hot air rush into the car, sucking out papers and trash into the black vacuum outside. He looked over his shoulder and saw his friend's body flailing wildly outside of the car, the wind rushing into his clothes, filling them like a wind sock before a storm. The man's friend was hanging on to the passenger side mirror with one hand and clawing desperately at the door with the other. The man could see that his friend was yelling, but his words were absorbed into the darkness along with everything else. Finally, after a few more seconds of staring, the man leaned across his seat and stretched out his hand. His friend was able to grab hold but as one hand wrapped around the other, the man lost control of the car and it torpedoed into a broken oak tree.

The man felt fine as he stepped out of the vehicle. Smoke was pouring out from under the hood but the car was still running, although every few seconds it would cough and sputter like a consumptive. He walked around the tree calling his friend's name over and over again. His voice didn't have the tone of distress that he was expecting to hear so he raised the pitch and made it slightly crack until it was acceptably urgent and overwrought, in case anyone else stopped. He circled the oak several times pausing to listen to the wind rush in and out of the gnarled hollow skeleton of the tree. He shivered, although the night air was stiflingly hot.

He looked under the car. He walked seventy-five feet in each direction. He lay down on the ground and yelled some curses into the base of the oak. He cupped his hand and stood on the roof of the car, screaming at the top of his lungs. He found a gopher snake twitching in the exhaust pipe and yanked the beast out, spinning it around like a lariat. The reptile hissed like a tea kettle going off and tried desperately to get at his hand, though only out of instinct. He continued to twist it above his head, screaming wildly for some time until he suddenly let go and lost his voice simultaneously. His mouth was still open and his lungs were beating desperately against his chest wall as the snake flew through the night sky like a forked-tongue arrow. He sat down on top of the car cross-legged and waited to hear the fiend land. But he had no way of knowing that two miles away, as the serpent accelerated downward, it slid

directly into a gopher hole and imbedded its fangs directly into its next meal.

Minutes passed and the man did not move. He stared down into the car's headlights, which shone into the thick brush ahead. He could see fine particles of bark and pollen and silk from a nearby spider-web swirling together in the light. He followed a loose strand of the gossamer filament undulating in the breeze as far as his eyes could see. He stood up and jumped down from the car and ran parallel to the headlight beam. The delicate fibril extended far past the light of the car so he gently put his palm underneath it and let it guide him through the forest. He saw dozens of red bloodshot eyes like an infrared peacock's tail bulging out from either side of the inflamed chaparral surrounding him. As he continued to walk, still gently cradling the silk, he occasionally felt a hot puff of air blow across his face.

He cleared the gorse and came to a meadow. The silk was gone from his hand but there were no longer any trees or briars or thorns anywhere. A somber moon hung in the sky like a wicker basket and he noticed something fall into the tall grass just ahead. He dove to the ground and got on his hands and knees, examining carefully between each blade of grass, flicking aside the pill bugs and ants crawling up his arms. After a moment, his fingers came across something. It was wedged tightly into the ground. He could feel its surface as he caressed it with his fingers. Only a small portion was exposed but he guessed that it was large. It felt cool and dry against his sweaty palms. He dug his nails into the ground exposing more and more of it, feverishly ripping out chunks of grass and throwing them over his head. But new cover grew back instantly, so he was forced to work blindly. He continued to dig tirelessly. The nails slipped off his fingers like rings and soon they were replaced by hematic clots caked over with dirt. Finally, hours later, long after lactic acid had saturated every muscle in his body, he found himself at the bottom of a large pit staring up at the enormous white mass obstructing the morning sunrise.

The hole he had feverishly dug to expose the enormous bulk was now too large to climb out of and he found himself helplessly staring up toward the sky. He first noticed the throbbing in his right middle finger. Gloves of dried blood that seemed to pulse in sync with the pain covered his hands. His fingers swelled as if they were to burst out of the crusty shell at any moment. He tried to make a fist but found that his joints were fused together. A sudden feeling of anger came upon him and he unleashed a vicious backhand into a sharp rock jutting out of the ground. The scab shattered and he felt as if he had been struck by lightning. He looked at his hand, free now, and it appeared to be aflame. He fell down in the small space between the object and the wall of the hole and gazed straight ahead. The mass appeared to resemble an egg, although he had only unearthed half of it.

It was perfectly white and various objects in the air seemed to be violently repelled by its shell. He watched a leaf slowly descend from above, but as it came within a foot of the egg, he felt a slight chill in the pit and saw the veins in the leaf freeze solid as it dropped like a stone into his lap, crumbling into dust. □□ He reached out and placed his bare fingertips against the egg. Its algid surface was as smooth as polished amethyst. He rose to his feet and placed both hands on it, feeling a stream of iciness flow into his palms. He trembled but did not move as an ominous cloud appeared in the sky. He rubbed the egg all around, pressing his body tightly into its shell until his face was flattened against it. He did not notice the darkening of the atmosphere and the first rumble of thunder. He was tightly clasping the egg when the sky opened.

The raindrops were the size of watermelons as a fleet of jet-black clouds released them like bombs. There were few at first, but they were large. As one hit the ground, a deafening thunderclap accented its delivery and soon the pit began filling with water. He was still locked into an embrace with the egg but now his grip on the lustrous surface was slipping. It quivered in the ground as the storm grew wilder. As he clawed at the egg, a giant raindrop exploded at the apex and it sent a torrent of water cascading down the side of the shell. The force knocked him backward and another water bomb slammed him against the wall of the pit. □□ As the water level began to rise inside the pit, the egg started to wobble as if it was breaking free of the earth. The man rose to his feet and watched for a moment as it teetered back and forth, like a buoy in the ocean. He held on to a tree root with one hand, as the impact of the rain grew stronger. When the water reached ground level, the clay could no longer hold the egg and it burst forth with a popping noise. The man let go of the root and made a desperate lunge toward the egg, which was now resting in the middle of the meadow. □□

I run, arms outstretched, through the knee-deep water...through the chest-high water...swimming now...arms flailing in the waves. Smaller, insignificant raindrops are now contributing to a vast, infinite reservoir. The egg is still in sight. It is bobbing up and down in the water far ahead. I know that I can make it. I put my head down into the water and surge forward against the current. My arms are moving of their own free will and I feel each tiny pocket of water in my palm just before it slips through and another replaces it. Once, I open my eyes underwater and see the bottom of the egg, a bowed shadow in the murky liquid. It is not far now. A few more strokes and I will be there. I lift my head out of the water and see it just ahead. The burnish of its ivory shell is electrifying against the ebony void of the sea. □ The rain falls in tiny, painful drops now. It strikes my face like a volley of birdshot. I look up into a perfectly rounded black nebula that has descended directly above the egg. It is slightly vibrating and emitting terrible sounds of splintering bones and twisting metal. I swim desperately to the egg and try to push it away. The humidity is unbearable under the cloud and I feel its presence swelling amongst the cacophony. After a great effort of contortion and writhing, I manage to move the egg to an open portion of water and straddle it, the point between my legs. □

Sparks are shooting out of the gravid cloud and the air is charged with static electricity. Beads of sweat are falling off my face and they sizzle as they roll down the eggshell into the sea. I am rocking back and forth roaring like a madman but the extraordinary sounds of the thunderstorm drown me out completely. Suddenly, everything is engulfed in a scintillating silver light, as if someone has just taken a flash photograph of the entire world. It is accompanied by a deafening explosion of thunder so low in frequency yet so loud, that every mammal lung within a hundred miles collapses immediately. All except mine. My body resists the cannonade and I see a slow-motion series of events. □ The black cloud ruptures and a jagged bolt of lightning rushes out furiously, in search of a conductor. It glows pale blue as it descends downward. As its tip enters the liquid, the water temperature rises and as its entire length penetrates the surface, a vortex forms, engulfing it completely. I am still atop the egg as the maelstrom draws me closer. The sound of water rushing downward now overpowers the rain, which has slowed to a drizzle. I do not try to jump off. Oddly, I am calm as I rip off my shirt and throw it into the whirlpool.

The water around the edge is frothy white and there is no escape as I succumb to its spiraling motion. It is slow at first, but as I near the epicenter, the vortex moves faster and faster until it reaches a dizzying speed and I become nothing more than a blurred speck of the imagination as I disappear. □□

It was dark and silent. He opened his eyes and for a moment thought he had gone blind. Nausea immediately rose from the pit of his stomach and his brain began to tingle with anxiety. He examined his body, carefully feeling each limb, and after a thorough inspection from head to toe, he relaxed a bit. The man was sure that he was inside the egg and he felt comfort in knowing this. The last thing he remembered was getting sucked into the whirlpool. Just as he lost consciousness, he felt the eggshell soften, drawing his body into the dark cavity.

The man stood up and took several steps until he hit the wall. He did it again in a different direction and repeated this over and over again until he had grown familiar with the contour of the egg. There was nothing to do in the darkness so he sat and thought. It was a safe place so he let his mind wander far away; to places he had never been.

He imagined seeing things that he knew didn't exist through eyes that had long ago been sewn shut. In the darkness a horizon appeared. It was far off in the distance and glowed orange against the night sky. He saw himself floating on the ocean sprawled out on an oak leaf. Stars appeared in the sky shining like diamonds against black velvet. He drifted for a while, his leg dangling off the side into the warm water. Strange aquatic beings chased each other around his ankle and through the spaces between his toes. He saw a sailfish shoot out of the water like a mortar. It flew across the sky in a rainbow arc until it met the wing of a seagull. The bird was carrying an oyster in its beak but as the marlin's bony snout pierced its wing, splitting open a web of blood vessels, the wrinkled shell fell free and dropped like a stone into the water. It descended slowly into the depths, undisturbed, through schools of fish and coral. As it passed into a cloud of krill, a giant black shadow appeared from below and swallowed everything in sight. The tiny mollusk entered the great beast along with the all of the other lesser life forms and thousands of gallons of water. A mound of spongy flesh swelled inside the gaping orifice and pushed everything towards a never-ending tunnel to nowhere. Just before the last few gallons of water were funneled down the animal's throat, it exhaled deeply, forcing the oyster upward, through a small blowhole, propelling it back into the sky-back into the beak of a bleeding gull.

The man grew tired. He reached up and pinched the moon, bringing it within inches of his face. It smelled like a rotten cantaloupe and he squeezed it between his fingers until it popped, leaking its sugary pulp down his arm. He tossed it over his shoulder and as it hit the water he heard a vicious struggle ensue between the sharks and the eels. He saw the water turn to froth like whipped egg whites and he dipped his hand into the cream. He laid a small dollop on his tongue but it was too sweet so he let the other animals fight over it. He reached back up and grabbed a hold of the black cover enveloping the sky. He pulled it off with both hands and tossed it aside, covering up the moon-battle still raging in the water.

He felt the leaf stir below his feet as he looked directly into the sun. It was shining a deep cherry-red and he moved it aside with the back of his hand until it was behind him, casting a long shadow

ahead. He could see that he was approaching a great waterfall. It was larger than anything he had ever seen, stretching infinitely in both directions. As he floated closer, he was surprised that there was no mist. The water just dropped off without a sound. He stood on the leaf silently, his arms crossed, and waited...

...He opened his eyes and realized that the egg was moving. The up and down bobbing motion told him he was back in the water again. It was still pitch black and a sense of urgency came quickly and told him he did not have much time. He began pounding on the side of the egg with his fists. He ran like a charging bull, head first, into the shell. He felt no pain, only a fierce need to escape. Once, he thought he heard a crack so he hit it again, even harder. Now there was a jagged fissure in front of him. Like a madman, he ran into it over and over again until it became a spider-web sewn from beams of light.

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He knows what is outside. He rips off chunks of the egg like drywall until there is a hole big enough to see through. He sees the great chasm approaching and hesitates for a moment before tearing off another piece of shell. The water is neon-green as it begins to rush into the egg but by the time it reaches his waist, he is able to squeeze out into the open sea. Bright green liquid fills the egg and soon it sinks and is lost. He does not see this, however. The man is staring directly ahead into the great waterfall. The only thing more striking than the emptying of the world is the total silence in the air. There is no sound and his voice does not ring in his ears. He yells something but the air is like a sun-bleached skeleton, picked clean of all vibrations. He feels something in the water. It is not an object, but instead a force that resonates through his body. He dips his head into the water and hears a thousand voices all speaking at once. He opens his eyes but sees only the vast expanse of green. Above the water he hears nothing again. Perhaps, he thinks, the vibrations from the atmosphere have somehow been transferred into the water. Just as he comes up again, he realizes that he has reached the top of the falls. There is no time for any more thought as he tumbles off the edge of the shelf and into the abyss below.

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"Sebastian! What the hell kind of person are you?"

The old woman demanding a response was standing merely inches away from my face. Her breath smelled like a wet block of jalapeno cheddar dipped in coffee. I could actually feel the words coming out of her mouth and striking my forehead. I felt like vomiting but instead I grimaced and swallowed deeply. I had been aware of her mouth opening and closing rapidly for some time now, but the angry sounds of her voice had only just begun to register in my ears.

"You can't just back out now! What about all of the invitations? We already reserved the chapel and hired the priest!" She was quite hysterical at this point. "Oh my God. This can't be happening."

I tried to zone her out again, but somehow my gaze fell upon the girl crying on the couch. Her head sagged in her hands and she was crying so hard that it looked like she was in the middle of a mild seizure. In a brief moment of clarity I asked myself if I was making a huge mistake. Was I throwing

away something special? Was this something I would regret for the rest of my life? The girl looked up at me from under a mask of runny mascara and swollen eyes. Yes, at that very moment I knew I was making a choice that would haunt me for the rest of my life.

I zoned out again, this time seeing far into the future. I saw the fuzzy outline of a man and a woman surrounded by a few children. They were in a park. The sun was shining and the children were running around, yelling and jumping over each other. I zoomed in closer. Who were they? Could I be playing a part in that equation? She was there. I could see *that* with certainty. Who was the man, though? Had I come to my senses standing here, years earlier? Slowly, I walked up to the couple and touched the man on the shoulder. He turned around slowly and I was shocked as I stared into his face...

I could hear the old lady screaming obscenities as I got into my car. They had both run out of the house onto the front lawn, but they did not cross the fence. I started the engine and sat there for a minute. The old lady had stopped yelling and all I could hear was the whining of a broken fan belt. I rolled down the window and several moths flew out from behind the sun visor. I shifted into first and held down the clutch for a moment before letting go and speeding down Fillmore St. for the last time ever.