

Silent Valley

by J. Fallthrough

“Silent Valley: The quietest place in the Western hemisphere.” Jerry pulls back the throttle and squints so the wrinkles deepen around his eyes and creep out past the frame of his sunglasses. Even through my headphones and the thwok of the helicopter blades I can tell he's imitating the suede-like voice on the promotional videos—the ones my father made.

“Where quiet is all you'll hear,” Jerry continues.

He knows. This former military pilot with a burgeoning potbelly and who smells of Irish Spring knows who I am. At the start of my coerced fame, Jerry was the kind I took refuge in. I liked to imagine people like this—grizzled, blue-collar-types who kept off social media and still used pen and paper—not knowing my name. I had never met them, but I once believed that they were out there, safeguarding my anonymity with their ignorance.

Jerry nods toward the tops of the abandoned huts just at the edge of our

vision. Even from here I can see that they sway a little. “Even those brainiac scientists couldn't figure out why the hell these mountains are takin' a walk,” he says.

As if science has anything to do with this. I close my eyes and hope this is a polite enough way to tell him I don't want to talk.

The air in the cockpit seems chillier with my eyes closed, so I open them again and when I do I can just make out a patch of green from our tennis court below.

“Holy hell,” Jerry says, “even your family's place is gone now. It was here the last time I choppered someone in,”

Now he's made it plain he knows me. My stomach starts to flip, but then I remember Anahara's admonishment: “Anxiety can be quieted if you focus on the Convergence. Seize on it hard and the most untamable fear grows silent.” I do and it does.

It helps that I can see that the West mountain—the one we used to call “Mae” when I was a kid—has not only subsumed much of our

compound, but taken with it most of the pine-crammed forest that ringed the family outpost. I take my binoculars from my bag and survey Mae's path of consumption. Gone are the guesthouse, the main house, the stables, the studio my mother had built when she went through her artist phase.

"I swear she's moving faster by the day," Jerry says.

"Technically, no, there's been no speed up for any of the mountains. They're just coming for the heart of—"

"Everything your old man built."

We dip down and I can see that the main road through town has been severed by South mountain. The road, which once wound through the leafy heart of Silent Valley, looks like a bent arm with its elbow hacked off.

WestSouthNorthEast, I say to myself. This is the order it will happen in. The edges of West, South, North, East mountains will meet and knit together, leaving only a small aperture of what was Silent Valley.

The landing strip that cuts through a yellow field like a stream comes into view and Jerry leans into the throttle. We lower down. When I zoom in with my binoculars I can make out Anahara's dark shape sitting in a white pickup truck. I have only known him from his emails, which are meandering and beautiful; the emails that if too long a time went by without one would have me calling in one of Dad's IT people to make sure my computer and my Wi-Fi were in good working order. It's only now as we descend so close to the landing strip below that I can see the dents on the truck and notice that the rear bumper is hanging off on one side that I can admit to myself that I had feared Anahara wouldn't show up.

Anahara is skinnier than I imagined. When he hugs me and whispers "*WestSouthNorthEast*" in my ear his ribs mash against my breasts. I look up and watch the helicopter get smaller and fly away like gnat.

I follow Anahara back to the truck and watch the edges of his low-slung jeans rub against the stubble of the field.

Anahara looks back at me and stops.
“Don't forget that,” he says, pointing to the duffle bag that sits on the landing strip.

When I don't move, he says, “Over there” and points again.

He walks to the truck and I head back to the strip.

I need two hands to carry the bag, which is stuffed with everything Anahara told me to bring from my old life.

I'm about to throw it in the bed of the truck when Anahara motions to me to put it in the passenger side of the cab. We open the truck doors with a clank and get in. He turns the key and the truck sputters to life. I get in next to him, the duffel bag crowding my feet.

“Finally home,” he says. He smiles, showing dentures slightly too big for his mouth. The edges the teeth are as evenly aligned as piano keys.

“Finally,” I answer.

I reach for the seat belt and realize that it has been sliced in two.

Anahara sees me from the corner of his eye and smiles. “We know we won't go before the Convergence, and besides we're the only car on the road these days.” His face is as smooth as quartz.

As we head out of the field, I turn the handle to roll up the window and realize that there is no window. Just as I start to feel relieved that Anahara doesn't seem to notice he says, “It's an old truck.”

We drive off the field and start down the main road into the heart of Silent Valley. The buffeting mountains, which give the valley its quiet, are unremarkable with their jagged peaks and charcoal skin. I have stopped comparing them to the majestic Pyrenees or the Sangre di Cristos that turned purple in the right light. I imagine one day soon, I will see them as beautiful.

The quiet is even thicker with the mountains moving together and all I can hear is the rattling of the old truck and the squeak when Anahara taps the brake. We pass a sign that says “Downtown Silent Valley 15 Miles” with “Silent Valley” crossed out and replaced by “Sinagrais,” the original name of the valley. It's a word I remember my parents saying when I was a kid. I remember too the day the

name was changed because Dad got a certificate from the Cranbrooke Institute of Acoustical Studies certifying that the valley was, indeed, the quietest place in the Western hemisphere. I didn't understand why they laughed when they talked about that.

I can just begin to see the face of South mountain intersecting with the road, making a dead-end. Anahara speeds up toward the mountain wall. He drives so fast that the cold air blowing in through the window frame turns my face numb. I open my mouth to say "Anahara," but his name chokes in my throat. I feel like everything in me has turned to liquid. Then, in what I'm sure is the last possible second, he jams on the brakes and the screech is so loud that it makes me scream. We skid toward the mountain, the truck fishtailing out and stop within inches of it. The truck is parallel to the mountain so that I would have taken the initial hit if we had collided with it.

Anahara starts laughing and he sounds surprisingly girlish.

He rubs the back of his hand against my face and it comes away wet with tears, which he licks off and then laughs again.

"Saltiest tears, sweetest heart," he says.

He keeps laughing and pinches the bridge of his nose. His long dark hair falls into his face.

When he can finally talk again, he says: "The humor comes with the faith."

"1139" is spray-painted on the rock wall. The day of Convergence; one-thousand one-hundred and thirty-nine days after the first movement was detected.

Anahara points to the numbers and says "We know we won't go before then and soon you will too. Know it *and* believe it." He drills his finger so hard into my chest that I wince.

I keep crying and Anahara pulls me toward him.

"Look over there," he says and points to the right.

In the distance I can see the red and orange heads of maple trees sticking out from under the mountain rim, the arms of the treetops intermingle like sleeping lovers.

Anahara pulls me closer to him and says “Have you even seen anything so beautiful?”

I think back to my ski trips to Switzerland, the Kenyan safari we went on for my sixteenth birthday, the summers sailing on the Mediterranean, and I realize I haven't.

“Redheads asleep,” Anahara says, and, once again, it's like he can get close to my thoughts.

He shifts the truck into gear and we start to make our way around the mountain's edge to pick up the other end of the road. There is hardly a path and the truck jostles along the unsteady terrain, tossing me around as if I'm weightless. I smell dead leaves and jasmine and hear the liquid trill of warblers.

It's been more than two hours, I think, when the road finally comes into view. Anahara speeds up and drives onto the abandoned road with the truck heaving and steam escaping the hood, ghostlike.

It's when we enter the part of town where the workers lived that the giant Kentucky Fried Chicken bucket rotating on a pole breaks through the horizon. It still spins because of the generators my father had installed, and there is a part of me that wants to tell Anahara this, but I stay quiet.

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The mattresses are stamped with “Property of the U.S. Military” and the smell of old fog that has settled in them. The odor is rancid, but no one seems to notice or maybe the smell of smoke from the fire we orbit, each in on our bed, masks it for most of the group. Not me. I take the soap carved into a rose that I found in the bathroom the other day out of my pocket and hold it up to my nose for a long sniff. A cheap concentrate of roses fills my nostrils. I would have been disgusted by this scent in my old life, would have thought it a vulgar smell. Now it just brings relief. Relief from the odor of old fog, smoke, and frying grease that clings to the air around the KFC.

I take another long breath in and that's when I notice Andrew, the architect from Denver whom Jerry ferried in a little while after me. He's watching me, his sketchpad balanced on his crossed legs and a pencil in his hand. I get the feeling I'm being judged for the soap, so

I put it back in my pocket and Andrew looks back down at his sketchpad.

I returned to the collage I am making with leftover KFC buckets, old receipts, menus, coupons, and anything else that has words printed on it. I cover the unfolded family-size box with sentences. Mostly I have to cut out individual letters to make words and this slows down my mind and defangs the insults and condemnation I'm recreating. Each sentence is from the emails, social media posts, and sometimes letters I received after my wedding plans became public, and I entered the merciless fiefdom of every stranger's imagination. I spell out "Kill yourself slowly, you cunt" with letters of various sizes. I use softened lard as glue, but it barely holds down the pieces.

Not counting Anahara we are six altogether, less than I had thought. I had expected a community. Could six be a community? Whenever I come close to asking that out loud I realize it is a meaningless question, formed in the confusion of the old thinking I had to escape. Six was a community; five was a community. One could be a community if looked at a certain way. Were we not all ecosystems unto ourselves?

As we sat, we are seven now anyway because Anahara also sits on a mattress in the KFC parking lot and, like the rest of us, he works on a creative project: making a small abstract sculpture out of twigs. O'Brien, a former tech executive and one of the earliest to buy a vacation house in Silent Valley, sketches with a charcoal pencil and every now and then he rubs his finger across a border to get a smudge effect. Since he coughs a lot and covers his mouth when he does, he has black fingerprints across his left cheek that look as if someone has slapped him and left bruises behind.

Stalsett, a business consultant from Los Angeles, whom I'm told was one of the first to join Anahara, writes her novel on a yellow legal pad, scribbling away in her jagged handwriting. Foster, the oldest of them, draws on an old paper bag with colored oil pencils. He stops every few minutes to scratch at the wire-like stubble on his chin and wrap his blankets tighter around him. Looking at him

encased in two quilts makes me so hot I start to panic slightly and I have to look up at the spinning bucket that hovers overhead to calm down. Dani is tying strips of old towels together into a tapestry. She was a dancer once; a dancer and a vegan chef, and she has legs that remind me of the ropy lava rock I saw in the Philippines. My parents were at the opening of her restaurant in Silent Valley, but I keep this loose connection a secret.

Anahara's twig sculpture starts looking like a steeple and he leans back on his bed letting it stand on its own. He has taken out his dentures and his lips cave into his mouth. He picks up the sculpture gingerly, walks to the edge of the fire and tosses it in. The fire spits back at him, but he moves so fast away from it that he's untouched by the sparks. Then O'Brien gets up with his charcoal drawing and takes Foster's oil pencil art since Foster is now too weak to move from his mattress. He tosses it in the flames and they go up with barely a crackle.

This is what Anahara calls "returnwork," a preparation for the Convergence. We were learning to practice letting go and releasing ourselves, so that we would remain calm when the Convergence happened. We were getting comfortable with endings—or "returnings" as Anahara instructed us to call the inevitable.

I take my collage and move toward the fire. It's just as I let it fly that out of the corner of my eye I see Andrew running. He's headed for the West mountain, the one that is closest to us. Reflexively, I start to chase him with Anahara and everyone else but Foster. None of us can run very fast. We live on a diet of deep-fried chicken, mealy biscuits, and what's left of the soda reserves.

Still, I manage to outrun them all. I reach out to grab Andrew's t-shirt and almost catch him, but he wriggles loose and back kicks me in the shin. I fall down and when I try to get up I slip on the wet grass, and even though I break the fall with my arms my forehead still hits the ground. When I get up again I'm dizzy but I run myself alert and I'm the closest to Andrew as he starts scaling the mountain. I jump on his back and make myself dead weight. As he slides down the jagged surface of the peels away at his skin. We roll

on the ground, until Anahara and O'Brien separate us and O'Brien sits on Andrew's legs.

When we get back to the camp Foster is sitting at the side of his mattress, stooped over, as if he had tried to get up.

"Where you goin', runner?" he says to Andrew.

"Just nerves." Anahara says.

Anahara ushers us all into the KFC. Andrew is crying and tries to freeze where he is, so O'Brien and Stallett take hold of him on either side and drag him into the building. I help Foster in.

Anahara has us sit on the floor. He goes into the kitchen and I hear him turn on the soda dispenser. He returns with a tray of Cokes, each one with a straw in it, and hands them out to us. I take a sip. The soda is flat and syrupy and it has a bitter aftertaste. I can tell by the faces of everyone around that they taste it too.

"Keep drinking," Anahara says.

I take another long draw and this time the aftertaste has softened. I pull the straw out and take a deep gulp. That's when my mind wanders just to the horizon of sleep. Anahara's voice keeps me from falling off.

Convergence is coming. Oneness is coming. But we fear it and our fear is rooted in our original illusion—not original sin—but original illusion. Why have so many of you suffered? Why have you come here? Why not go on in your illusion? Because you've seen through it and once you have even a glimpse of the truth you're changed forever, even when you retreat back into illusion, back into all that makes you blind and stupid you are still changed. When our four mothers take us back it will not be an end, it will be a return to the most elemental, the most necessary, the most ancient oneness and you will be more fully alive or perhaps alive for the first—

The hissing starts, softly at first. Then it grows louder until it subsumes Anahara's voice. Anahara has talked about this. He's told me that the mountains hiss, but I've been deaf to it. It won't be long now.

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Jerry takes a long pull of SnowLeopard 880 Ale and looks at himself in the mirror behind the bar. His face is so lined that it looks like someone carved a map on it. He just turned 58, but he looks older. Is that why Madison Kendall was surprised he recognized her? What he should really ask himself is why he made it so obvious that he knew her. He knows this. That's why he flicks to another subject in his mind. He doesn't want to make the connection between his age and his need to show Madison that he, too, knew about her because of her social media slaughter. That was pathetic. And it wasn't even true. He first learned about Madison from one of the newspapers that Myra, his late wife, had subscribed to and that he wouldn't cancel. Myra. He would never have gotten involved in this scheme if she were still alive. That's another question he doesn't want to ask himself: Who would he have been without her?

Jerry drains his beer and just as he's about to signal the bartender for another one, Kirby sits down next to him, right on time. Kirby smiles and Jerry sees that he's had his teeth fixed. The awful, ill-fitting dentures that sometimes clicked when he talked are gone, replaced by a mouthful of perfect teeth. He's cut his hair and bleached it blonde. Jerry holds out his hand and whispers, "Anahara." He hates the name *Kirby*. It's a little shit's name. Kirby flashes him an angry look.

"Sorry, buddy," Jerry says to him, "Buy you a beer?"

"Nah, let's just settle up," Kirby says.

They walk to the parking lot and get into the back of Kirby's van. Kirby motions for Jerry to sit down and he does. He crosses his legs and a bolt of pain shoots through his hip. He thinks of a rusty hinge.

Kirby slides a toolbox out from under the passenger seat and unlocks it.

He hands Jerry an envelope of money and then looks at him as if he's expecting him to count out the bills, expecting him to make sure that he's been paid for helicoptering everyone in, for re-filling the generators with propane, for ferrying in gas for the truck, for supplying mattresses from the army surplus, for everything else. Has he really gotten his fair share of the property turned over to

Kirby by everyone who died in Silent Valley? But Jerry just sticks the envelope in his jacket's interior pocket. It wasn't about the money. Jerry might feel better if it was.

"I got a fair price for O'Brien's electronics and Madison—Jesus, she dumped so much jewelry on me I thought I'd need a fucking backhoe to move it."

Jerry looks out the window of the van and watches a group of men walk into Tip's Tavern. He's sure that any one of them needs this money more than he does. He wants to take the envelope out of his pocket, but he can't imagine what to do with it after that, so he leaves it there.

Jerry stands up and as Kirby looks up at him from the floor of the van, he remembers Kirby's sweaty face as he scaled up the rope ladder into the helicopter the day he locked Madison and the rest of them in the Kentucky Fried Chicken. That was the last time he'd seen Kirby and he'd thought of dumping him, of shaking him off the ladder and leaving him die in Silent Valley.

"Thanks," Jerry says and stands up.

"Pleasure's all mine," Kirby answers and slides open the van door.

Jerry goes back into Tip's and sits back down where he had been before.

Now the TV is on. He wants it off. Wants to plunk down the envelope of money and tell the bartender to click it off or change the channel or kill the sound. But all he can do is order another SnowLeopard 880, this time with a shot of whiskey.

A man with sharp cheekbones is on TV.

"We're talking with Dr. Sherry Renson. She's a psychologist who studies cults," he says. A woman with gray hair and blue eyes comes on the screen.

"Dr. Renson, what can you tell us about why this tragedy happened? Why would a group of people willingly go to their deaths?"

"Well, it seems unbelievable, but you had two explosive elements that sadly combined here. First, we're learning more about how each member of the group had suffered some kind of trauma

recently. Second, you have a phenomenon that scientists can't explain—the shifting mountains. This was, unfortunately, a situation ripe for a cult leader to take advantage of. I've read through some of the emails Anahara sent to the group. He basically repeats the same thing to each one: that the mountains were calling for them and that it was only their bodies that they would take. He called it “Convergence” and said that once they were crushed by the mountains, they would be set free. That an idyllic afterlife awaited them, if only they'd give themselves to the mountains. Now, to you and I this sounds bizarre, but, again, all of them were going through crises and they were vulnerable to a figure like Anahara.”

“But Anahara is believed to have died with them, so he must of have convinced himself of this too,” the man says.

Jerry gulps down the whiskey.

“Yes, well, it appears he was suffering from some kind of psychosis,” Dr. Renson says.

The camera cuts away from her and back to the man. “We're learning more about the people who died in Silent Valley. One of them, Madison Kendall, was the daughter of Jacob Kendall, a partner in Kendall, Gallo, and Jurgens, the property developers who created the Silent Valley community. Through his spokesperson Kendall has issued this statement: ‘My daughter was in a low period of her life and was led tragically astray. Our family is devastated and asks for privacy as we grieve.’”

Madison Kendall. Jerry remembers sitting in the easy chair that still smelled of Myra and reading about her. Her plans for her wedding had been leaked and the extravagance triggered a public outrage. What really burned people was her plan to seed the clouds for a few moments of rain on her wedding day. The 200 guests would be provided with custom-made white umbrellas that changed color when they became wet and spelled out “Madison & Clark” in purple—Madison's favorite color. Jerry had the sense that he had come across the anti-Myra and that he could hate Madison as much as he loved Myra. He had met his ultimate enemy. That she was alive

and Myra wasn't was a real *fuck you* from someone or something Jerry wasn't prepared to call God.

Someone on TV says "She was never the same after that."

That was the day Jerry created his social media accounts. At first, he watched the endless tirades of abuse and fury, much of anonymous. Then he participated. He remembers his first post: "\$5 million on a wedding? Someone throw this bitch from a plane." His rage made him feel young again, made him feel purposeful as he had in the military. It was in this electronic netherworld where he met Kirby, who called himself "The Brutalator" and had been firing off some of the most venomous stuff.

Someone on TV says, "She broke off the engagement."

Jerry remembers the pristine clarity of his hatred for Madison. He could blame her for everything: the end of his career as an army pilot; the way the younger guys condescended to him, that he now needed pills to fuck. But most of all he blamed her for Myra's death, for Myra's refusal to continue with chemotherapy, for Myra's abandonment of him. He tries to re-trace how he held Madison responsible for all of this, but he can't. He feels like he's trying to decipher some alien script. He feels like he's charting a flight path without a known destination.

Someone on TV says, "She left a letter saying she was going to the Convergence."

Jerry finished his beer and rests his forehead on the bar. The cold varnished wood sends a chill down him and his teeth chatter slightly. His stomach churns and he can taste acid his mouth. He closes his eyes, wishing only for his own Convergence.

