

# Departures

*by* Javy Gwaltney

Abigail dragged the monkey Nathaniel, her favorite plush toy, in the red dust as her parents moved crummy looking cardboard boxes from the house into the back of the custard colored Winnebago. This wasn't the first time she had ever seen a Winnebago; her friend Jimmy had one but it was a toy miniature that he gnawed on with crooked teeth. Samantha had one too, but her family was poor, which confused Abigail because when she asked her mother if they were poor now, because of the unexpected acquisition of this Winnebago, Alyssa smiled at her and said in that maternal reassuring manner that's never really that reassuring, "No, sweetie, we aren't poor."

She followed her mother as she went inside to grab a box of cooking utensils. Her father, Richard, was coming down the stairs with a foldable lawn chair tucked under his arm. "We ready, baby?" he asked.

"Just about," Alyssa replied.

"And what about you sunshine?" he said, patting Abigail on the head.

"Yes," she said, though she didn't know why they were going camping or why they had to move out of the house for good to get there.

They had packed up the house and locked the door by 3:30. Most of what had been inside the house was now lying neatly in rows in the front yard packed in cardboard boxes. The majority of Abigail's toys were sealed away in those boxes—except for Nathaniel. She would never give up Nathaniel.

As they pulled away from the yard, Abigail looked through the window and saw, for the first time, the white poster board leaning against the mailbox that said "FREE" in messy black handwriting. She looked to see if Bobby Lyons was playing with his brother in their yard, but he wasn't. They drove out of the cul de-sac and then out of Las Vegas onto Interstate-15.

She played with Nathaniel for a while, feeding him portions of imaginary mashed bananas and teaching him his ABCs. Richard smoked a strawberry flavored cigarillo with the window down while Alyssa flipped through a copy of *Central Magazine*. The radio was on and a soft-spoken man was speaking: "Let me say this first of all. We all know someday there's going to be judgment day—some day! It just happens to be that we are the generation that landed there at that time, when judgment day is coming."

Abigail pretended that Nathaniel was in a plane and started making engine noises as she spun him around in the air

"Honey, Abbie," he father said.

She looked up.

"Can you keep it down a just little bit? Daddy's trying to listen to the radio."

"Yes, Daddy." She went back to making airplane noises, but she was quiet about it this time. Eventually, she became bored and put Nathaniel down. Turning her attention to the window, she watched as the white sand, dry bushes, and guard rails zoomed by.

They pulled off in Mesquite to get some gas. Alyssa woke Abigail up and took her to the restroom while Richard filled up the tank, using his debit card to buy 112 dollars worth of gas. He realized after he stuck the gas cap back on that he was famished. He walked inside the gas station and perused the candy aisle, picking up everything from Reese's Peanut Butter Cups to the imitation Skittles that tasted better than actual Skittles. He also picked up a bag of Baked Lays for Abigail.

The tall man at the register was wearing only denim except for a hat that had THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE written on it in yellow text next to a poor rendition of a Grey alien. He had a five a clock shadow, a brown and gray ponytail, and yellow and green chipped teeth. The tag attached to his shirt said his name was Toby.

He laid the candy on the counter. The cashier looked at Richard and then at the candy and then at Richard again.

"It's a long way off until Halloween," Toby said.

"I'm just getting some last minute decadence in," he joked nervously, indicating his shirt with a quick downward glance.

The cashier peered down Richard's shirt. "BRING ON THE EARTHQUAKE, MAY 21st, 2011," it said.

The man snorted. "You one of those loonies, huh?"

Richard stiffened. Where did this man get off badgering him, the customer? "If by 'loony,' you mean 'god-fearing family man' then yes."

Another snort. "Those things aren't mutually exclusive."

He felt the anger pulsating in arms and hatred beating in his chest. There was red in his peripherals. "Why don't you just finish ringing up my chocolate," he suggested with a hint of malice.

The cashier silently rang up the rest of the candy.

"21 dollars and 47 cents."

He paid the man and, with two convenient store bags filled with candy, started to walk out to the RV.

"Enjoy the apocalypse!" the cashier called when he got to the door. Some of the other people in the store looked up, and Richard considered cursing the hillbilly out but thought the better of it.

"That's a lot of candy," Alyssa said when he got back to the RV.

"Yeah," he said.

He gave Abigail her bag of Lays, and she shrieked with delight: "Chips!"

"I bet the cashier must have looked at you like you were crazy."

"Yeah," he said as he started up the RV.

"What's got you so flustered?"

"Nothing, baby."

"Richard."

"Nothing."

"Fine. Be like that."

They crossed into Arizona, and then Utah several hours later, reaching Traveler's Paradise shortly after nightfall. The RV camp was nearly full when they got there, but they found a spot near the end of the lot. Abigail counted the rows of winnabegos from her window as her father parked. There were 9.

"Well, I think we should go see our brothers and sisters," Richard said after he pulled the key out of the ignition slot.

"It's kind of late, isn't it? Abbie needs to get some sleep soon."

"Nonsense. It's only 10:30. We passed a big group of them in the middle of the park. They were dancing and reading scripture."

"I know but I'm awfully tired. And I'm sure Abigail is too."

"No! I want to go out!" Abigail protested.

Her mother sighed. "Let me use the bathroom and we'll go."

They walked back to the middle of the park where a small group of people was sitting around a large campfire. Some of them were cooking marshmallows and Abigail wanted one because they smelled nice, but she knew better than to ask.

One of the men near the fire, a wiry fellow with a snub nose and a five O' clock shadow, called them over. "Come on over here and have a seat, weary travelers," he said, shaking Richard's hand. "The name's John-Quincy Bishop, and these," he said, indicating two little blonde headed girls, "are my twin daughters, the pearls of my life, Rebecca and Ruth."

"My name's Dick and this is my wife, Alyssa, and my own little pearl, Abigail."

"That's a nice name for such a darling little girl," John-Quincy said as they all sat down.

"What do you say to that, Abbie?"

"Thank you," she responded shyly.

Also sitting around the campfire was an elderly black man wearing a bowler hat and sunglasses. He grinned, revealing more gum than teeth. He said, "Looks like we got another batch of fools."

"Ignore him," John-Quincy whispered. "He's just a cranky old fart named Harmonica Williams."

"You know I'm blind and not deaf, right? Don't make me get up—get up and whoop your ass, boy."

"Alright, alright, calm down, Harmonica. I didn't mean any harm by it."

"I'll take this here cane and whip the smug look off your face."

John-Quincy rolled his eyes and redirected his attention to the new arrivals. "So, where are ya 'll from?"

"Vegas," Alyssa said. "What about you, Mr. Bishop? Where do you hail from?"

"Arkansas."

"That's a long way away," Richard said.

Abigail stared across the fire at the twins, who were sticking marshmallows on the ends of their respective sticks.

"Yeah, there were gatherings closer to home, but I wanted to come out to the desert and get the full Israelite experience, you know? Hey, Becca, Ruth," he said, noticing Abigail's gaze. "Why don't you offer our little guest a marshmella?"

"Oh, you don't have to—" Alyssa started but John-Quincy beat her to the punch.

"Don't you worry about it one bit."

Ruth stuck a marshmallow on a stick and handed it to Abigail.

"Thank you," she said in her mouse voice.

"The garage I worked at let me go about a week ago," John-Quincy continued. "I barely had enough cash for groceries for the three of us, much less rent. I was a wreck until I heard brother Camping on the radio, talking about how the time had come for the faithful to ascend to the heavens. I cried some tears of joy that day, let me tell you. What about you two?"

"Youth Minister," Richard said. Alyssa smiled and told John-Quincy that she was a stay-at-home mom or, as Richard liked to call her, an assistant to the Youth Minister.

"That there's a noble profession."

"Well, thanks," Richard replied.

Abigail turned—she had heard footsteps. Two black boys on the verge of adolescence ran up to Harmonica and patted him on the shoulder.

"Gramps! We gotta go. Moms is making dinner."

"That you, Harold? Yeah it is. I can tell by the way you smell. Put some deodorant on, boy."

"Don't play like that, gramps," the one who wasn't named Harold said. "Let's go eat."

"And you, Da'Quan, learn some damn English before I smack your nappy head so hard it plops off your fat neck onto the dirt."

"Sorry about him," Harold said as the two boys led him away from the fire. The two families continued to talk about the lives they had left and the trips they had made to get to Traveller's Paradise while a man at another campfire a couple of yard away spoke loudly to a group of people who listened with rapt attention. "For true and righteous are his judgments: for he hath judged the great whore, which did corrupt the earth with her fornication, and hath avenged blood of his servants at her hand. And again they said...."

Abigail stared at the man as he spoke with the fire dancing in front of him. He had no hair except for his bushy brown eyebrows. His nose was squat and his teeth were yellow like corn. She was reminded of an evil sorcerer from one of her favorite cartoons, and suddenly she felt afraid and disliked the man even though she did not know what he was saying.

"Richard," said Alyssa, "I think Abigail and I are going to go to bed."

"Maybe that's a good idea," Richard answered, seeing his daughter's frightened expression. He kissed her on the head, and Alyssa took her hand and led her away from the firepit.

"Night daddy," she said before they had gotten too far away.

That night she slept uneasy. There were too many thoughts swirling in her head. Why were they here? Who was that black man? More importantly, who was the scary man yelling at those people by the fire? She began to cry and held Nathaniel tighter. Why couldn't they go home again? Later, her father came back and checked on her as she lay on the pull-out bed in the Winnebago. She fell asleep pretending she was asleep.

The next morning her he woke her up when it was still dark.

"Daddy?"

"Come on, baby."

"Where are we going? Why is it still dark?"

He carried her in his arms outside and they sat on the ground in front of the Winnebago. "Keep your eyes on the sky," he told her. The horizon was slightly pink but she couldn't see anything else, and didn't know what else her father wanted her to see. She fell asleep slowly with her eyelids falling until the eyes were completely covered. Her consciousness had just become shrouded in darkness when she was shaken awake by her father. "Look at that, Abbie!" he said. She blinked several times and lifted her gaze to see what looked like a glowing orange moon rising in morning sky.

"Isn't it pretty?" her father whispered in her ear.

"Yes," she said, not wanting to disappoint him. "Very pretty."

He smiled at her. "Okay, you can go back to sleep now." Picking her up again, he took her back to her bed and put her down. She tried to get back to sleep but couldn't, especially when the morning light shined through the window above her cot and danced across her eyelids. She ate a half-melted Reese's cup for breakfast and walked outside with Nathaniel in her arms.

Her parents were talking with John-Quincy again. Richard was holding Alyssa around the waist and smiling as their new acquaintance spoke: "To think, man, just to think that it'll all be over soon."

"I know. And we're the generation that it's happened to." her father said. "Whoever thought we'd be so lucky and cursed at the same time?"

John-Quincy raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean by 'cursed?'" he asked.

"Well, our little girls. They won't be able to experience—oof!"

Alyssa had jabbed Richard in the belly with her elbow and tilted her head in the direction of Abigail. Richard flushed red from pain and embarrassment. "Hey, baby!" he wheezed as she neared them. "Good morning, Abbie," Alyssa said. "Have you eaten breakfast?"

Abigail nodded.

"Are you still hungry?"

She shook her head.

"You sure? We've got the waffle maker in the Winnebago. I can make you a waffle."

"I'm full, mommy."

"Okay, baby. " Alyssa looked back at John-Quincy and Richard who were quietly kicking dust. "The adults are talking right now. Why don't you walk around and play with some of the other kids."

Abigail didn't want to play with the other children. John-Quincy's daughters were creepy and, even worse, they had hogged all the marshmallows. She didn't want play with the black kids either, because they were bigger than her and that probably meant that they were mean. But she knew by Alyssa's tone that the suggestion was actually a polite demand. She nodded and started walking around Traveler's Paradise by herself, holding Nathanial to her chest as though she was protecting him from the thieves of the RV lot.

"Here comes that little girl who smelled liked ginger snaps last night," Harmonica Williams said when she passed the rusty white trailer in front of which he was sitting. He was wearing the same clothes as the night before and was twisting his cane so that it dug deeper into the ground. "Today, she smells like," he said, animatedly sniffing the air, "like peanut buttuh and chocolate. Somebody been eating candy."

She giggled at the man's sniffing. He was a funny person.

"Hello," she said shyly.

"What's your name again, sweetie?" he asked , reaching out to touch her cheek. She drew back at first but then, remembering he was blind and what her mother had told her about blind people, let him.

"Abigail," she said, "and this is Nathanial." She let him touch Nathanial's face.

"Oooh, some kind of big fierce animal ain't he? A lion, I bet."

She giggled again: "He's a monkey."

"Oooh, a monkey. What kind of monkey is he? A chimpanzee?"

"I dunno," she said uncertainly. "He's my monkey."

"Oh, then he must be a good monkey."

"Sometimes."



He laughed and she caught a whiff of his breath; it reminded her of buttermilk.

"So, you here for the end of the world too?"

Abigail said nothing.

"I guess not then. I ain't either. My family drug me out here all the way from old Mississippi and I had to listen to them yapping that nonsense the whole damn ride. I told them it's stupid—world's not going to end today. But did they listen? Of course not. They never listen to Harmonica. Only the big man knows when it's coming. Not no man on the radio. Says so in the dang book: 'no one knows the day or the hour.'"

She felt like she should have known who 'the big man' was, what "it" was, or the book he was talking about, but she didn't. Abigail didn't ask either because Harmonica was starting to get grumpy.

"I have to go back to mommy."

"Alright then, little girl. Don't you worry your head about nothing, you hear? Ain't nothing bad gonna happen."

On the way back she walked past several RVs where people were sitting out with their families, watching televisions or playing board games. One family was cooking weenies on a George Foreman and had laptop on a table nearby tuned into an online radio station. She heard the same soft voice that she had heard on the Winnebago's radio the day before: "It's gonna start with a huge earthquake. The bible describes it as an earthquake that's way bigger than anything that had ever been experienced. "

When she got back to the Winnebago, John-Quincy was gone and her parents were microwaving soup. Her mother heated up some Spaghetti O's for her. With her belly full and her eyes tired, Abigail crawled into the bed again and fell asleep to the sound of air conditioning unit gallantly fighting the heat. When she woke up it was still day time, but barely, and the inside of her head felt dry. She looked at the clock on the microwave. The green LCD located above the microwave's buttons told her it was 6:30.

Walking outside, she saw that several of the RVs had departed from the lot. Harmonica's trailer was gone. She looked out across

the lot and saw her parents, John-Quincy, and his little girls sitting around the unlit fire pit. As got closer she saw that her parents' faces were flushed and her father's hair was matted with sweat. John-Quincy was staring at the ground.

"It was supposed to happen at 6:00," she heard her father say.

"It'll happen," John-Quincy said. He patted Ruth on the head but her face remained expressionless. "Before midnight. It's gotta happen."

"Yeah," her father said. "Before midnight."

Alyssa peered up over Richard's shoulder and saw her little girl.

"Abbie," she called weakly. Abigail went over and sat between her parents. Her father hugged her. She was scared. Why was everyone so sad? What had she missed?

Suddenly there was a crash and she looked up. Across the lot, someone had thrown a lap top into the side of a red truck. It turned out to be the scary man from the night before. "Those bastards!" he roared. "They lied to us and turned off their radio station. I gave them all my money!" he cried. "All of it!"

She saw him fall to his knees and start sobbing in the dirt. A crowd of people gathered around the man. She wanted to get up and help him, but she was still scared of him. No one moved and then, after a minute, John-Quincy got up. He walked over slowly and extended his hand.

"Come on, brother. Get up and let's brush that dust off ya."

"Go away," the man sobbed. "I gave them everything."

"Don't lose faith yet. Day ain't over."

"The radio said '6:00!'"

"Maybe they're wrong."

"Then maybe they're wrong about everything."

"You gotta believe that they ain't."

"Why?"

"Cause that's all I've got," John-Quincy said, helping the man to his feet. "I've got a feeling that's all you got too."

"I'm going," the man said, brushing the dirt of his jeans.

"Going where?"

"Anywhere. If you idiots wised up, you'd do the same thing too."

They watched as he climbed into the truck and drove away. John-Quincy went back to the fire pit and sat beside his two children, hugging them with one of his long thin arms. Around them, people were packing up and leaving the park. Some of them stayed outside their RVs and sat at the fire pits, but by nightfall more than half of the lot was deserted.

They sat around the fire, which was burning brightly now, and roasted more marshmallows. The Bishop girls were less stingy with their stash so Abigail disliked them less. Her parents talked with John-Quincy about people named Luke and Mark. She had often heard her parents talk about these people at home, and sometimes they tried to talk to her about them, but she didn't know who they were, which was fine with her because they sounded old and boring.

"Is that a monkey?"

Abigail was jarred out of her thoughts—Rebecca had spoken.

"Can I hold him?"

She looked at Nathaniel and then back at Rebecca. She didn't want to let her hold him, but she didn't want to make her mother angry with her poor manners. She walked over and gave the monkey to Rebecca who felt his belly and rubbed her finger over his button eyes, which annoyed Abigail because she knew it hurt Nathaniel. She wanted to put her finger in Rebecca's eye to see if she liked it, but she kept her hands in her lap.

"Well, girls," John-Quincy said hoarsely. "It's uh, 11:30. I think ya'll should get to bed. I'll be there soon."

"But daddy..." Ruth said.

"Go on."

The two of them got up and ran to their RV. Abigail watched as Rebecca ran off with Nathaniel in her hands, and she was angry. That was *her monkey*.

"Mommy," Abigail began to protest, but her mother's glare pierced her, robbed her of her voice. "We'll get your monkey in the morning, Abbie." How did she know?

"Yes, mommy."

"I think it's about time you went to bed too, sweetie. I'll walk you back." Alyssa took her by the hand.

"25 minutes," Richard said when they had gone. "Do you really think it's going to happen?" he asked, wiping sweat and dirt from his forehead with a napkin.

"Yes," John-Quincy answered without hesitation.

"Really?"

"Yes, my faith is unshakeable that this is the end."

They sat in silence as time passed—5 minutes, then 10.

"I think," John-Quincy said as he stood up, "I'm going to go spend the last few minutes with my daughters."

"I understand."

"It was nice meeting you, Dick. You're a good family man," he said, extending his hand to be shaken. "God and family are everything; it's nice to meet someone who understands that."

"It was nice meeting you too, John."

"I'll see you after everything is done."

Richard watched John-Quincy enter his RV quietly and a feeling of unease fell over him. He stirred the firepit for a few minutes and then, cursing to himself, he kicked dirt over the fire and extinguished it. He had only walked a couple of feet when midnight struck and a loud sound akin to that of a car backfiring echoed from within John-Quincy's RV. He turned just in time to hear the sound again, and was at the door of the RV when the final bang filled the cavern of his ears.

Abigail was awoken by the sound of sirens. Looking up, she saw blue and red lights dancing with the shadows on the wall.

"Mommy?" she called. There was no reply. She scurried to the door and opened it. Richard, still wearing his BRING ON THE EARTHQUAKE shirt, was talking with a police officer who was jotting down notes in a little book. There were yellow lines of tape attached to wooden posts in front of the Bishops' RV.

Just as Abigail saw the red stains on her father's shirt, she felt a jerk on her collar and she opened her mouth to scream but before the sound could escape she heard her mother go, "Abbie!" Alyssa

wrapped her arms around her daughter and hugged tightly. It was dark inside the Winnebago, but Abigail could still make out the red eyes and tell-tell tear stained cheeks that her mother had when she was upset.

"Mommy?" she said, her voice muffled by the embrace. Alyssa loosened her grip.

"It's okay, Abbie. It's okay. Daddy's going to be back soon. We're leaving tonight."

"Why?"

"We just have to, baby," her mother sobbed. "Go lie down and try to go back to sleep."

"Mommy?"

"Right now!" her mother snapped.

Without another word, Abigail crawled back into the bed as her mother went out the door. She lay there for some time listening to the sounds outside, those of vehicles roaring to life and shriek of the tires burning rubber on the asphalt. After a few minutes, she started to cry. Why had they come to this place? Why were the policemen there? Why was her mother crying? And how was she going to get Nathaniel back?

When the door opened unexpectedly, she stopped sobbing and wiped her tears. By the time the door had closed, and both her parents were inside, she lay still with her eyes closed. Her father's voice was the one she heard first. "Jesus," it said.

"We have to leave, Rich. There's nothing here. Everyone else is going," her mother said quietly.

"But we don't have anywhere to go. We don't even have enough money for next month's mortgage. We spent it all on the RV. I think I overdrew my account with the gas."

"I've got 250 dollars left."

"That's not a lot."

"It'll get us gas."

"To where? Vegas? I don't even have a job to go back to."

"Of course you do. Pastor Grey would—"

"No, you don't understand," he said with such violence that Abigail opened one eye to make sure that he had not done something mean to her mother.

"I can't do it anymore. The faith's gone."

Heavy silence filled the Winnebago. Abigail's leg itched but she dare not scratch it.

"We'll go east," her mother said suddenly. "My brother will let us stay with him until we figure something out."

"To *Kentucky*? You want us to drive all the way to Kentucky?"

"Well, do you have a better idea?"

"No," he said, after a moment. "I don't."

Abigail heard shuffling, and then came the revving of the engine as her father turned the ignition key. She felt the vehicle move beneath her. Her heart pounded. They were leaving him; she had to tell them! She started to move her arms and sit up when the sound of her mother's voice sent her falling back onto the bed again.

"Should we wake her up?"

"No, we'll tell her when we stop for breakfast...shit!" Richard said.

"What?"

"We forgot the damn monkey."

"You didn't ask the officer?"

"No, I didn't think about it."

"Damn it, Richard. I told you to ask him."

"It doesn't matter now, does it? He probably wouldn't have let me get it anyway."

"She is going to freak out. That was her favorite toy."

"We'll get her another one somewhere."

"How long before we need more gas?"

"Three hours or so."

"I think I'm going to get some sleep. Do you mind if I turn on some boring radio for a bit? It'll help me sleep and then I can drive for a bit after we get gas."

"Yeah, just keep it low."

Abigail turned over to face the wall and started sniffing again. How could they have forgotten Nathaniel? They had to turn back *now*. They had to rescue him from the bad place. A despair she had never known before flooded her little body. Her parents would not turn back even if she begged them too. He was gone forever and she was completely alone.

In the passenger seat, Alyssa was trying to get to sleep but the man on the radio wasn't soothing at all. This voice belonged to a younger man, someone with enough life still left in him to be capable of malicious cruelty. She imagined him to be one of those college-age socialist atheists who thought DJing constituted a career. "Well, folks," the young man said, "May 21st has come and gone, and surprise surprise, we're all still here. Man, oh man, you just have to feel sorry for all those poor suckers out there even if they are nutbags—well, maybe not. It's kind of hard not to laugh when you see a zealot with egg on his face. Just deserts, baby. Just deserts."

"Can you turn that shit off?" Richard hissed.

Alyssa turned the knob, cutting the youngster's voice cut off abruptly.

"Richard, I want to pray."

He grunted.

"I said 'I want to pray.'"

"Then pray, damn you, pray. If you think it's going to do any good, pray your heart out. I'm busy driving."

She turned away from her husband and, closing her eyes, began to mumble.

He drove silently, his face becoming paler with each passing minute. Looking through the windshield, he saw the desert surrounding their Winnebago and imagined the sands rising like a tidal wave and crashing down to erase them from the earth. The sands of Utah did no such thing. There would be no deliverance or annihilation this night. There was only a road leading into a darkness just out of the reach of their headlights.

