

Silent Valley

by Lorna Garano

“Silent Valley: The quietest place in the Western Hemisphere.” Jerry pulls back the throttle and squints so the wrinkles deepen around his eye and creep out past the frame of his sunglasses. Even through my headphones 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, he knows, he knows chugs through my mind. This former military pilot with the beginnings of a potbelly simmering over his waistband who hints of the laboratory spice of cheap cologne, knows who I am and this is his way of saying so.

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

vision

“That’s where the scientists stayed. Even the brainiacs couldn’t figure out what the hell is going on down there.”

I close my eyes and hope this is a polite enough way to tell him I don’t want to talk. Science had nothing to do with it anyway. Those abandoned huts are just the artifacts of a people who don’t know their own limitations.

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. It was here the last time I choppered someone in.”

Now there is no doubt: He knows me. Or he knows who he thinks I am. Uncountable versions of me live in the individual fiefdoms of imagination. That feeling returns—the one I wouldn’t have thought possible before my unwilling fame. It’s like I’m paralyzed, while my blood has turned to fire. 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 will grow 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.”

He says this with an air of satisfaction that makes me want to say something eviscerating back, but what is there to say? First rule of coerced fame: The non-stranger always wins.

We dip down and I can see that the main road through town has been severed by South mountain. It looks like a bent arm that has had 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 that 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 field 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.

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Anahara is skinnier than I imagined. When he hugs me and whispers “*WestSouthNorthEast*” in my ear I feel his ribs mash

against my breasts. I follow him back to the truck and watch the edges of his low-slung jeans dust against the stubble of the field.

He turns the key and the truck sputters to life.

“Finally home,” he says. There is a tiny, barley audible click between each word because he wears dentures that are slightly too big for his mouth.

“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.” For a man who is fifty-four 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 start down the main road into the heart of Silent Valley. The buffeting mountains, which give the valley its quiet, are ugly with their jagged unremarkable peaks and almost-black color, but that no longer bothers me. 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. It was one of those words that seemed like an unsolvable riddle, a lock on the impenetrable world of adults.

I can just begin to see 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 and wants to escape. Then, in what I'm sure is the last possible moment 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 Anahara 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 his eyes with his fingers.

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 straight ahead," he says and points out in front of us.

In the distance I can see a supine copse of maple trees. The rows closest to the mountain have been flattened by it and lay on the ground. Their trunks are subsumed by the mountain's rim and their leafy heads poke out and press against the trunks in front of them that have been felled by their weight. Collapsed together, their red and orange leaves look like a static fire.

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.

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. I pull away at first but he locks his arm around me and drives with one hand.

When the road comes into view Anahara speeds up and as he enters it he drives even faster. We pass by the empty boutiques and restaurants that made up the downtown of Silent Valley. A few of the clothing stores still have dressed mannequins in their windows. As we edge past the heart of the town the 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. Instead, I bite my lip and press myself closer to him.

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The mattresses smell of old fog that has settled in them and turned to something 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 that our little outpost is built around.

I take another long breath in and that's when I notice Andrew looking at me, his sketchpad balanced on his crossed legs and a pencil in his hand. Andrew, the architect from Denver, who was ferried in by Jerry about a week before me. 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 the cut up KFC buckets. The old colonel with the Van Dyke beard duplicated over it in different sizes and crisscrossed with banners that read "9-Piece Tenders;" "Family Dinner;" "Biscuits in Gravy;" "The Colonels' Own Recipe." I use cooled off cooking grease as glue.

Not counting Anahara we are seven altogether, less than I had thought. I had expected a community. Could seven 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. Seven 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 eight 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 sewing 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 to see if it can stand on its own. When it does he picks it up 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 bed. 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, making peace with the inevitable.

I take my collage and move toward the fire. I crumple it up into a ball so I can stand farther away from the flames. This is probably cheating. 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, processed biscuits, and what's left of the soda reserves. We've all gotten fat, except for Anahara.

Still I manage to outrun them all, even Dani with her still-powerful legs. 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 still gain speed quickly 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 mountain the jagged edges scrape away at his skin. We roll on the ground, until Anahara and O'Brien separate us and O'Brien sit on Andrew's legs.

When we get back to the camp Foster is standing at the side of his bed,

stooped over.

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

“Just nerves. I know what will calm him and all of us down,” Anahara says.

Anahara 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 he delivers them to each of on our beds. I take a sip and it has a bitter aftertaste. I can tell by the faces of everyone around me that they too know this is no straight-up Coca-Cola.

“Keep drinking,” Anahara says.

I take another long draw and this time the aftertaste has softened. I pull the straw out, throw it on the ground next to my mattress, 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. This is sown in us early and it tells us that we are invincible, that all we do matters, that our own petty accomplishments can stave of our return to oneness. 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 chirping of cicadas overtakes Anahara's voice. *They must be getting closer*, I think.

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“*Madison Ashworth*. It sounds like a brand of designer sheets,” Janice says.

Jerry almost spits out his beer.

Kirby tilts his chair back and smiles, the teeth of his cheap dentures are as

even as piano keys. He used to be afraid to smile in front of Janice because of this, but now he's more confident in her affections.

Janice looks sideways to Kirby and says, “Not that *Anahara* is any better.”

Jerry, mouth unimpeded by Snow Leopard 550 Ale, puts his forehead in his hand and laughs full-throatedly.

Kirby turns his palms up and says to Janice, "Would you follow a prophet named *Kirby*?"

"I wouldn't follow one named Anahara," she answers.

She stands up, taps Kirby on the back of the head playfully, he grabs her by her tiny waist and she lands on his lap. They kiss until Janice stands up again.

"That's nice," Jerry says in an Elvis Presley voice. His humor hasn't changed since when he was a kid making prank calls imitating radio announcers telling the dupe on the other end of the line that they'd won *\$10,000 and a Brand New Car*.

The soft light of the muted TV that Kirby mounted in a corner of what was once Tip's Tavern washes over the people laying on the floor, some asleep and almost angelic looking and others with their eyes wide open doing crossword puzzles, reading books, or just staring out into space. Some hug each other with their eyes closed, but everyone can see that they are not sleeping, just surrendering to the body next to them.

The place smells soggy, like the KFC camp. Kirby remembers when this smell was mixed with sweat and the dirt accumulated from a day's work, and how it always seemed loud even though he only really recalls the row of men quietly hunched over their drinks and sometimes catching furtive glimpses of themselves in the mirror on the other side of the bar.

"Madison almost seemed shocked that I knew who she was," Jerry says.

"As if anyone didn't," Kirby answers.

"Poor dipshit. One feature article away from happily ever after ..."

Jerry says.

"People starving and she's going to seed the clouds so it rains for her wedding. And the old man thinking he could shut down the whole Valley for her big fucking day," Kirby says.

“Everyone gets designer umbrellas,” Janice says this as she puts three more beers from the case they'd brought and shoved in an ice cooler under the bar on the table.

“BYOB is a strange rule for a bar,” Kirby says.

They all smile. In abandonment all rules change and abandonment was happening more and more. Empty malls, empty storefronts, empty restaurants. Shells of industry were all around. You brought your own booze to a place like Tip's, but then it was understood that when the TV was on everyone was silent, even if you were drunk. Not like in the old days when they'd turn on the closed captioning and everyone would just keep yammering in various states of inebriation. That just wasn't done here. Besides, who knew how long the power would hold out and then there would be no TV at all.

A curl of smoke is illuminated by a shaft of TV light. It looks like the delicate swirl of an Art Deco design. Cigarette smoking is once again allowed in public or in semi-public or in whatever these new living arrangements are.

“Silent Valley, certified by the Cranbrooke Institute of Environmental Science as the quietist place in the Western hemisphere.” Jerry is on a roll now, imitating the commercials that Madison's father had produced to sell vacation homes.

“My idiot daughter is going to bring my whole empire down by talking about her wedding in an article that will go viral,” Kirby says this, trying to imitate the voice that sounds like its been marinating in a cask with scotch whiskey for the last fifty years, but he doesn't quite capture it the way Jerry does.

Janice doesn't laugh. She remembers the anger focused like a laser beam on Madison and how she at first felt it too, but then had a strange sense that it had escaped its bounds, that the anger had become its own end.

Kirby notices that Janice isn't laughing and he stops and looks down.

Janice wants to say “we can no longer differentiate the symbolic from the substantive,” but she understands how haughty and heavy-

handed this sounds, like something from a bad speech. She's about to say something like, "We can't keep picking off individuals, eventually we're going to have to deal with the underlying problems that created this mess" but then someone turns on the sound from the TV and talking is no longer allowed.

Everyone looks up at the TV, but only Kirby and Jerry know that that is the monitor taken from Andrew's bedroom.

An aerial shot of the aperture that is left of Silent Valley flashes on the screen and a voiceover says, "That's all that's left of this playground of the rich. But scientists are still asking themselves *why, why have these mountains converged?* Many believe it's yet another unpredicted result of environmentally unsound practices, but no one can say for sure what is happening. Dr. Diane Browderman, a geologist who teaches at Amazon University in Seattle says that all previous theories have proven false."

A woman in a beige safari vest standing in front of a mountain range comes on screen and says, "We're still trying to figure this out. Right now we have more questions than answers."

"Until then it seems like others will be happy to step in with their own explanations. A cult led by a man calling himself 'Anahara,'—

Laughter ripples throughout the room.

"was crushed by the mountains yesterday in what they believed was a supernatural 'Convergence.' Their leader is thought to have died with them."

More laughter.

