REDRESS OF GRIEVANCES

A town named Redress of Grievances clings to the Cruces river, in gray clumps surrounded by vast green circles of farmland. The Cruces, made of melted snow from Northern mountains, downwardly curls through the desert, flanked by agricultural zones for the industrial production of dates, wheat, lettuce, pecans, cantaloupe, and cotton. The wide shapes abruptly stop at the border, and the river continues without them, out of reach. One asphalt tendril reaches out from the town to the highway.

At the start of the 21st century, Redress of Grievances experienced economic growth. A military training facility and four shipment warehouses opened nearby, driving consumption of crops and increasing property value. Developers, attracted by the cheap land and projected benefits, bought parcels of land on the outskirts of the town. They built new houses of plywood, drywall, and adobe, with front lawns and backyards.

2014 saw the beginning of the Southwestern Groundwater Crisis. To preserve water, the state government ordered an end to all further development and raised taxes on personal water use. The lawns went yellow, and then brown. The planned development zone of Vista Dolorosa (a name thought of by developers' hired advertising committee) was left unfinished. Only half of the houses were built, but all the streets and sidewalks were already placed, leaving large empty rectangles of dirt and sand next to the little neighborhood.

I am staying at the Main Street Hotel, a four-story adobe building with an oak facade and sun bleached advertisements in the windows. I have been hearing that it will rain soon, but right now, the unconstrained brightness reaches everything in this little hotel room: my bag and

notebook and phone on the table, all black, next to the window and now hot to the touch. The curtains here are not strong enough. There is a stain on the ceiling. I had to come here on very short notice. The developers suddenly want to continue their construction of Vista Dolorosa, now that the rain is back to feed the groundwater. As the sun sets, I read the local newspaper, *the Tribune of the Town of Redress of Grievances*, which is composed of just five tabloid pages riddled with advertisements for local attractions. It will be eighty degrees and sunny tomorrow. There is an ongoing editorial battle. Some want to rename the town to just "Redress" because the rest of it may dissuade tourists from coming to town, a charge led by small business owners, but the seemingly the less capitalist-minded, and perhaps monastically inclined, others (high schoolers, and old people) are firmly against the change. One old man wants the town's name to be solely "Grievances".

The Smiths are the first household I have to talk to. The house looks just like the others on the street, which is flattened by the morning sun. It's ten AM, Saturday. When I walked down Luna Street, half my vision was of normal houses, built in the typical faux-Spanish Mission Revival style, with parched lawns, some with palm trees, also dead; and on the other side was nothing but flat dirt and odd mounds of gravel and sand that, apparently, were never cleared away after construction abruptly ceased. It felt like carrying a heavy bag on just one shoulder, or wearing earphones that only worked on one ear. I found myself looking away from the emptiness and towards the houses. Most of them are uninhabited (Redress of Grievances has lost 15% of its population since the start of the Groundwater Crisis) but I could see the inhabited one from the crosswalk. If the residents aren't home, I've been told, I'll just have to come back another day, and then another, until the company will resort to sending them a letter, and, if they don't

respond in two weeks, the company will give them a phone call. It's my least favorite part of my job, to bother people, but the worst of it is usually that the door gets closed in my face. There is an empty house between Gutierrez and Smith. Howard Smith's house looks exactly like the others, besides a few wind chimes, because it was built at the exact same time, with the same materials. The construction company does not build developments house-by-house. The contractors dig out all the foundations, the septic tanks, then lay down the cement, and then the beams, and so on.

I just now notice Howard Smith sitting on the porch on a wooden rocking chair.

"Hey there, young man," Smith says to me as I ascend the steps. The door to his house is ajar, and I can hear applause and laughter from some game show playing inside. He has in his hand a glass of lemonade. "How can I help you?"

"Hello," I say, "I'm George Cerrano, a representative of Northwell Development Company," and then Howard Smith cuts me off to turn his body towards the door and yell at presumably his wife indoors:

"We have the… the development guy here!"

From inside, muffled: "Do you want some lemonade, honey?"

Howard Smith says to me: "She said, do you want some lemonade?"

"No lemonade for me, thanks," I reply. I set my briefcase down on the porch and sit on the other rocking chair.

"I saw you coming down the street," Howard Smith starts, smiling, "with your briefcase, like some big city guy, and I thought, damn, did I win the lottery?!" He breaks out into crackling, creaking laughter. He leans back his chair and looks at me with a grin.

"Aha. No. I'm just here to let you know about the plans to continue construction across the street and ask some questions about it."

"Aaah, of course," the old man says, his face settling down. His wife opens the door to bring out some more lemonade in a glass pitcher, and I feel a soothing breeze of conditioned air. "I brought some more just in case you change your mind."

"Thank you," I say, and she replies, "of course," and goes back into the house.

"So about the contract," Howard Smith starts, "I'll sign it, sure, and Helen here can sign it too, but do you have to get everyone to sign for it to happen?"

"You know I love to sign a contract," says Helen from another room.

"Yes, that would be ideal. But we're pretty sure it won't be a problem, we've got everything ready to get started," I say.

"Ah, so the lady next door'll stop you," Howard says. His eyes startle me; when he's not smiling or squinting, they're very large.

"Well, that's her right, as someone who lives here, but we'll try our best to win her over," I say, attempting to resolidify the plan. The protocol we all learn in training is to always start with the plan, as if it's already happening, and get people to feel like they're just acknowledging it.

"Naw," he says. "She won't do it, I don't think."

"Definitely not," says Helen, coming back up to the entrance.

"I think that those empty lots have… they must have mattered to her," Howard continues, "I remember… during those dry months…" he trails off, and Helen appears in the doorway again, and leans by resting her hand on the top of his chair.

I begin to say something, but then he regains his train of thought and says, “Her son loved to go out there. Dawn to dusk, ‘specially the one at the very end —-” (He stretches his entire body pointing towards a block of nothing at the edge of Vista Dolorosa) “— that one, he would go out there and just walk around in circles all day. He loved that place.”

“That’s odd”, I say aloud. Helen leans back and frowns. “Sorry,” I say. I guess that was rude.

“He started doing it during the drought, and then…” Howard sighs. “I don’t know. Nobody knows.”

“He disappeared,” Helen says, catching my eye. The two go silent. I can’t think of anything to say. I can hear the sounds of cars elsewhere in the town, some cicada buzzing somewhere. The creak of the rocking chair.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I say.

“Well, it was a sorry sight. I haven’t seen her very much since. And, you know, the father…”

“Ugh! The *father*,” Helen says.

“Hey now Helen, we don’t know the full situation here, and,” Howard starts, and Helen says, “You know what I think about David.”

“I know,” says Howard. “I just think it’s… it’s complicated.”

“Well, Howie, it just doesn’t seem that complicated to me,” Helen says, seriously and softly. They’ve had this argument before. “He left his own family and all those things happened. He could’ve been there, with all of them, but he wasn’t.”

“But we don’t know…”

"There's a lot we don't know. We can agree on that," Helen says, turning to me with a quick smile and a chuckle. The little exchange is over. This is how their marriage survives, probably. They've definitely been married a long time, and spend a lot of time sitting out here on the porch together. Their skin is tanned, they wear light shirts. Their wedding rings are golden; the same color as the desert. It's only getting hotter out here. It's almost lunchtime. There's a sandwich in my car I bought this morning that's probably baking in the heat.

"The contracts," I say, shuffling myself, and the husband and wife raise their heads.

"Right," says Howard, and I take out the two pieces of paper. The print is small enough for it to all fit on one page. They both sign, and Howard tells me, "Good luck with all this, kid. But I'd doubt the lady next will go for it."

"Bless her heart," Helen adds.

"Thanks," I say, and, again facing the empty lots, squinting my eyes, I leave.

I eat my sandwich and it isn't very good. I don't have a wife, or any children. I live in a third-floor apartment in a complex in Denver, without a front yard to put all my furniture in when my son disappears.

The next inhabited house on the block belongs to the Santino family. Their porch is crammed full of boxes. I ring the doorbell, which, since it was all manufactured by the same people, sounds just like the Gutierrez's.

A woman, presumably Lucia Santino, answers the door. "Hello," she says, looking past me, "I'm not trying to be a Mormon, or a Witness, or buy anything, or save the whales. Alright?" (A younger voice from inside says, "damn, what's wrong with the whales?")

"That's alright," I say, and I give the usual spiel of what I work for, and that I have a form for her to sign, and all that, and she says, "Alright, sure, come on in, I'll take a break."

I come into the house. There's a lot of other boxes around indoors. This house is decidedly more modern, with lots of pictures framed in metal on the wall. The family out canoeing. The family on a hike. The family at a Broadway show. The family in Mexico.

"Do you want any water, coffee, anything?" she asks. She seems quite tired.

"Is someone moving in?" I ask. (If that is the case, I would have to produce another contract to sign.)

"Someone's moving out," Lucia Santino says. She sits on the sofa and reaches for a small white remote. She presses a button and the air conditioner starts humming louder. "My son."

"Oh," I say. "Congratulations."

"Thank you," she says, "Thanks. It's a big adjustment. My son's going to oil school. Not the first one."

"'Oil school' is crazy," says a large teenager clomping into the living room. "Oh. Nice to meet you," he says to me, and sticks out a hand. I shake it because I have to. It's sweaty. "I'm Connor."

"It's school for oil stuff, it's oil school to me," says Lucia. "You know, in a good way!" She laughs.

"By the way, are there any other residents in this unit?" I ask.

"Not here right now. My husband is over at the base. The military base. West of here. And Karsten moved out."

"When will he be back? Your husband, I mean."

"In a month or so. He's training the newbies. And you forgot to answer me. Do you want water or coffee?"

"Coffee sounds good," I say.

"So," Connor says, sitting down too hard on the sofa, "You have to like, talk to everyone in Vista Dolorosa?"

"Yes, just briefly, to ask them if —"

"Even Ms. Gutierrez?" He asks.

"Yes, I saw her this morning," I say. Lucia gasps.

"Oh! How is she doing?" she asks, just as she was about to walk to the coffee maker. her voice softens. "Is she alright? I miss her so much."

I can't just not respond. "She seemed alright." It's easier to lie. "She was doing some cleaning."

"I saw she put all those things outside. Those were in her son's room. I bet she really misses him," Lucia says. Connor murmurs something about doing some more packing and leaves. Lucia seems not to notice, now looking at the pictures on the wall, away from me.

"I haven't seen her in a very long time. Not since before, you know… Simon went away."

It feels like she needs me to say something. "That must have been difficult."

"It was hard. For her, it was hard. And, you know, before it happened, we had our little life together. Like, it was weird, but it was fine. We lived. But it wasn't fully normal. I could always tell that something was going on and I would just ignore it. Maybe that's kind of mean. I don't know. But it felt like I had to do that for her. And, you know, it's very sad what happened, and I love her to death, and I loved Simon too; I mean, my *kids* loved him, they loved playing

with him after school. And then he stopped leaving the house... These days, my boys are hardly at home more than an hour before they go to sleep, or off to class, always out with their friends, but even those two hours awake are a lot for me...! So I can't imagine. I really miss Dymphna. I hardly see her at all anymore. That kind of... situation... it must have been hard on her. To deal with it all alone. One day, I remember it was in the late summer, one day we went out to get lunch together. And by the way she was dressed you would *think* she was... you know... nothing was going on, with this beautiful green dress with floral inseam designs, and turtle-shell sunglasses. We were having some rosé, which I always did with her, nobody else really knows how to have a good rosé conversation like she does. She's actually really funny. But sometimes, like she did that day, she would just say these things... She said to me — 'Lucia — I've been having these dreams'. And I leaned in, like, wow, she never tells me about this kind of thing ever, maybe I can finally say something, you know, about the situation. And she said... 'Lucia, I've been having these dreams. And they have such a feeling to them. Last night I dreamt... that Simon was working at an office. And he was wearing a suit and tie, and a wedding ring. And in the dream I asked him: How's the job? And he said: It's great. I'm settled in and ready to work hard. And I just knew it was a dream about the future. I felt it.'"

Lucia goes silent after that. She sniffles, and wipes her eyes with the end of her sleeve. A couple of seconds pass until she says, "it just didn't make any *sense*." She puts her hands down on her knees. The sound of air conditioning. She suddenly asks me: "Why did I tell you any of that?" Before I could stupidly answer, she got up, said, "Alright, let me sign the contract."

I produced three pages, two for Lucia and Connor, and one for Lucia to hand to her husband later. She signs both for herself and for Connor, with a signature I guess she made up.

“His handwriting is terrible,” she explains. She also forges her husband’s signature. She sighs. “Okay, is that all?”

“That should be it. Thanks,” I say.

By the time I leave, I realize I never had any coffee. I see Connor sitting outside on a lawn chair in the sun.

“Hope she didn’t talk your ear off,” he says, and then he says, “naw, just kidding.”

“I’m sorry to hear about your neighbors. It seems like they’ve gone through a lot.” I never had any of this in my own neighborhood growing up. Houses in the Texas suburbs are far apart, with garages front and center, and entrances hidden on the side.

“Yeah… Yeah, it’s been rough, I guess. I actually grew up with Simon.”

“Were you friends?”

“When we were little, yeah. Like until we were thirteen, when he changed. One time, actually… One time, oh man, I haven’t thought about this in a while, so basically, we used to walk home from middle school together, and there was this one old man, I think he’s dead now, or moved away, who would drive home super slow at the exact time we’d be going home, and whenever we’d see his car – it was a black car – we would run after it like dogs. We would see it from, like, the corner of our eye and just… run after it.” He laughs. “We would keep doing it like every day and I don’t know if the old man ever actually noticed us most of the time. And I never actually knew who he was. I only remember the back of his bald head. Anyway, one time, I decided to make a race out of it, and instead of running with him, I started trying to run faster, and I don’t even remember, like, what the finish line was, but anyways, I totally beat him, like, it was easy, and he got so mad. I never saw him that mad before and I never saw him that mad ever again. At first I thought it was like, a joke, and I remember I leaned on a tree to catch my breath,

but he didn't stop running, he came at me and grabbed my neck and my shoulder and threw me on the ground. And he just started swinging. Punching my face hard. Until he got tired and sort of fell off me. He told me he hated me and he wanted me to die. I've never felt so guilty. But we still had school the next day, and he told me he was sorry, and we were all good after that, but, hey man, obviously I was a little scared of him after that. But we were friends. We stopped talking later though."

"Why'd you stop talking?" I wish I had a story to share with him, like we were friends, but I can't remember anything, and it would be entirely unprofessional of me to do that, anyway.

"He just got weird."

"Weird how?"

Connor pushes his head back in a kind of awkward expression. "I mean, if you really wanna know, sure. Not weird in a bad way. Just weird. He would hand out these pamphlets to everyone explaining this… theory. Some kind of math religion. And he would only ever talk about that. That, and the weather. But he was still really nice to everyone all the time. And that was when he left the house, which wasn't often. Never during the day, or at night, only at sunrise and sunset."

I say nothing. I'm facing away from the sun, but I see the shadow I've cast over Connor, and the dried lawn, and the house, and I understand that it means the sun will set soon. There is still one more person I have to see.

Dymphna Gutierrez lives at 12a Luna Street, Vista Dolorosa, Redress of Grievances. There is furniture outside in the front yard: a wooden table, a swivel chair, a metal bedframe, and a lamp. I have been standing here between the chair and the table for longer than necessary. I look back

at the landscape, at the darkening cloudless sky, and ring the doorbell, which sounds exactly how I expected a doorbell to sound.

"Hello," Dymphna Gutierrez says, only after we have sat down at the dinner table in her shadowy house. Before that, she only motioned to me. There is a resounding absence of objects in every room I have seen (only glimpses for most of them). She sits across from me without makeup, wearing a black T-shirt. Behind her is a beige wall and the doors to the stairway.

I retrieve a folder from my briefcase. "Hi there," I say. "Nice to meet you. My name is George Cerrano, and I'm a representative of Northwell Development Company, which built this neighborhood."

"Nice to meet you," she says, putting her hands together.

"I came here to ask you personally if you could sign this contract that would allow us to continue construction across the street."

"No," she says.

"What did you say?"

"You can't do that," she says.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, but we really must insist," I say, taking papers out of the folder. "Because the state relaxed emergency regulations on water use, we will continue developing the land after we stopped in 2014. We already own it, we're just unpausing plans that were already put in place. Otherwise, the empty lots will become an eyesore."

Dymphna Gutierrez sighs, stands up, and walks through her house to the kitchen. I hear her pour a glass of something, and then another. When she returns I see that it was water. She hands me a glass.

She sips. She looks deep in thought. “I’m sorry,” I say, because I can’t think of anything else. “Would you like to see the plans?”

“I don’t want to see the plans.”

“Alright.”

I’m about to get up to leave, because this is all that I am required to do to be paid seventeen dollars an hour, for eight hours a day, when she says to me, “Are you any good at math?”

I say yes, and she takes me to a room where she said her son used to live.

It’s a blank room, just like everywhere else in the house. There are piles of paper on the floor. This must be, I realize, where she got that furniture she put out in the yard. “Don’t touch anything,” she says, which is already company protocol, so I wasn’t going to do it. She picks up one single paper, which I only now see is covered in numbers and letters in a kind of list. Only now do I notice the small black symbols on all the pages, like ants; after you notice one you start noticing more and more.

“What does it mean?” I ask.

“It’s his belief system,” says Dymphna. “It was very personal to him, but he would tell everyone about it, whenever they asked.” Some expression moves across her face. The sunlight from the window turns her face golden.

“What would he say?”

Dymphna leans on the wall, then slides down, until she’s sitting on the carpeted floor. From the opposite end of the room, I do the same.

“He was very concerned with people forgiving him. Something happened at school, I think, and he felt bad about it. He would ask me all the time, do they hate me? And I would

never have any idea what to say, because he would be too ashamed to tell me about it." Dymphna pauses, and scratches at the strands of synthetic fiber that made up the gray carpet. Every house on the street has a carpet like this one.

"I'm not religious, I wasn't even raised that way, not really. It was in the background. But he seemed so worried that one night I told him that maybe he could pray and feel forgiven." She gesticulates while she speaks, but at this point, she lets her hands fall to her sides. "It worked for a few days. But then he stopped sleeping, and one day, when we were having breakfast, and he had these horrible dark circles under his eyes, he told me about his idea.

He had a problem with the prayers I had taught him, that my mother taught me. They were too vague. He said that he was afraid God wouldn't understand them, and might grant him something else, or get the wrong idea, and it wouldn't work. So he tried to make them more specific. Wait… Here… he would make these lists… Here, look at this one." She leans over and sifts through the pages until she finds a page without numbers.

> Hypothetically, there should be an infinite amount, or at least a very high number, of possible prayers, given the amount of possible situations a believer may find themself in and its combinations with other factors. There are many factors to consider when finding the correct prayer including but not limited to: the day of the week, day of the month, season, weather conditions, time of day, ambient climate, proximity to freshwater and saltwater, role in family, age, whether you're alone or not, which hemisphere you are in, whether someone you know died recently (and how long ago that was), whether you've eaten that day (and if it was mostly grains, vegetables, fruits, or meats, or a balance between the four, or something else), hydration, where your last injury was, how painful it was from a scale of one to five, who you spoke to last and what their relation to you was, if any; how tired you are, how afraid you are, who you've injured physically or psychically during your life, their relation to you, how long ago that was. Through the below calculations I was able to find 434217728 possible prayers. That is not the total amount, of course, there could be other factors that I have not accounted for. The good thing about this, though, is that we can be infinitely precise in what we want to ask God for, so that He doesn't get confused.

“This was part of the pamphlets he gave to everyone he saw,” she says. I start reading it. With a little laugh, she continues, “I got a lot of phone calls that week. Everyone was really concerned. And I was concerned too because that’s my baby. Before this he never really showed signs of… of mental issues that I knew of. But he became obsessed with the calculations. He was just very focused. But he was always polite and nice to everyone. He was actually even nicer than he was before. He would say hello to everyone I had over. But if they would invite him out he would politely decline. He would always say: I don't think I can make it, sorry, I have a lot of work to do. He was just very focused and that's how it appeared to everyone. And if he would have just focused on anything else... I gave up on that. I did yell at him sometimes. But he would just sit there and not say anything. He wouldn't respond to me and would give me this kind of sad smile with his -- with his, his eyebrows bunched together, and he would kind of clasp his hands like this.... ….And sit there. And at that point he was stronger and heavier than me so I couldn't drag him out even if I wanted to.”

The pamphlet looks printed, but, as I read, I realize it’s actually his handwriting, perfectly precise, written with a ballpoint pen.

I leave the odd house. I’m faced with the empty lot again. The dirt mounds are exactly parallel to the street, set back eighty yards. They remind me of a gust front, a storm rolling in, but they stay perfectly still, dry and bathed in sunlight, waiting.