THE LEADER

Everyone knows the Leader has the largest garbage dump in the country: six by five miles of refuse, forming what a local paper called *a landscape of misery*. When the Leader reads this phrase, he believes it to be melodramatic, if not slanderous. The same article then refers to the *plight* of the dump's population. By this, the journalist is referring to the approximately six dozen families who live and work in the dump and whose members range in age from a three-month-old infant to an octogenarian. Aside from the octogenarian, average life span for those living in the dump, according to the article, is about forty-five years. This below-average life span can be explained by the fact that those people living in the dump—men, women, children—spend their days and nights gleaning decaying plastics and pharmaceuticals that damage their lungs with various pulmonary diseases. The article names several workers who died of these diseases. As the Leader reads, he matches facial features to forenames. After a minute of doing this, the Leader puts down the paper and walks toward the burned-plastic odor of his territory, inhales, and plans his day.

• • •

The Leader has a saying: *Silence has the loudest voice*. It's a saying of which his men are aware, though they have never heard the Leader say it. The men are aware of the saying's paradox, even if they do not use the word *paradox*. Paradoxes can also be felt, and this is enough. To explain: the men receive the Leader's orders and messages, but they do not hear him, not directly, not his voice. The men send requests and messages to the Leader, and there is no oral intercourse,

so to speak, between the Leader and his men. Instead, the hustling of messages is left up to the Little Leader. The Little Leader has no other designation, though the cadre name is inaccurate if taken literally. In fact, the Little Leader is not little. He is tall, six feet two inches, weighing more than three hundred pounds. A more accurate designation might be the Lesser Leader or the Assistant Leader or the Deputy Leader. If the Little Leader has a message from one of the men—a request for new equipment, a notice about a lazy worker—the Little Leader alone decides whether to convey the message to the Leader. When the Little Leader speaks with the Leader it is often over a secure two-way radio or through a one-way glass with the Leader's face obscured by the mirrored side of the glass and his subordinate visible through the transparent side of the glass. Usually, and for no known reason, the message is whispered. If the Leader responds to the whisper, the Little Leader does not write down the response; he makes a mental note. In this way, no paper trail is left. If the Little Leader believes the Leader will not be interested in a given message, then that message will be answered by the Little Leader in the name of the Leader. When the men receive their response, they do not know if it is the Leader or the Little Leader who is responding, though all orders are officially from the Leader. Because of this arrangement, much is left to the Little Leader's discretion. Of course, it is easy to see how this arrangement gives a tremendous amount of power to the Little Leader and, of course, how this arrangement could lead to an abuse of that power. This arrangement has already led to the younger men having doubts. In specific, these men doubt the Leader exists. They do not hear him, they do not see him, and they therefore believe that the myth of the Leader is a ruse. They believe that he—the man, his myth—is the creation of the Little Leader. This position, held by many men tending toward the youthful, is very awkward for the Little Leader. If the Leader were to know that his men

doubt his existence, the Little Leader's position would be in jeopardy. In an attempt to quash any further skepticism, the Little Leader once asked these younger men, the skeptics: *Many countrymen also question the existence of God. Does this mean God does not exist*? The younger men, thinking this over, were not convinced.

• • •

The Leader has sixteen rear loaders, a grapple truck, one hundred and forty-two collectors, seven conveyor belts, two incinerators, and a vintage 1938 Garwood Load Packer. (A rumor says the Garwood, a collector's item, is silver plated, but no one outside the garbage dump has seen the rumored Garwood.) All of this equipment serves one purpose: collecting and sorting for resale the dozens of tons of garbage coming in from the city each day. Unlike some cities—cities that belong to what some call the *Developed World*, but most still anachronistically call the *First World*—the city that Leader services has no recycling program. Even worse, the city has a very poorly coordinated public garbage-collection system, and the poverty of this system has allowed for the rise of many middlemen like the Leader. (The Leader quibbles with this designation, *middlemen*, but it irks him less than some of the more pejorative phrases he has recently read in the press.) This lack of citywide coordination means that arrangements are made on a person-by-person basis, or on a building-by-building basis, or, in two cases, on a neighborhood-by-neighborhood basis. No matter what the basis, all of the refuse is shuttled through the same pyramid of collectors, rear loaders, sorters, and—yes—middlemen. Populating the pyramid's base are the collectors: orange-clad men permanently smelling of their trafficked substance. They work on foot and by hand, and they are the first to tear open the rotten presents from the citizens of the city,

rummaging through the bags' contents for anything that can be resold immediately and without much hygienic fuss. When the day ends, these collectors sell their gleanings and return the rest of the garbage to the dump. It's this gleaning by the pyramid's base that the Leader has put to an end, or, more accurately, has attempted to put to an end. As told by the Leader to the Little Leader, *These collectors are to collect; tell them to collect*. The Leader said these words because gleaning by those at the base of the pyramid is bad for business at the top. By also selling what they collect, the collectors rob the second level, those living in the dump, of their rewards, and diminish the pyramid—subsequently diminishing the Leader as well. This diminishment has led the Leader to fire many of his collectors; it has also led to several violent encounters between the collectors and the families in the dump, encounters definitely tolerated, and possibly ordered, by the Leader himself. The violent encounters left none dead, but several were hospitalized, all of whom could not afford their bills. The Leader covered their expenses and made sure they convalesced in the best of conditions. Within a month, the men were back to work.

• • •

The Leader has no reason to let his garbage dump burn. This is what is said, more or less, when his garbage dump burns for three days and four nights. It is most likely a spontaneous combustion, people say. No matter the cause, the fire produces a cloud that can be seen as far away as the city center, and in this usually toxin-free zone, the people in the city can see, breathe, what they thought was gone forever. As the fire reflects in their picture windows and windshields, city authorities debate whether to let the Leader's dump burn or to send aid. Prudently, the mayor chooses the latter option. When the fire trucks arrive, the firemen realize they

can do very little; the fire has begun consuming itself, and, restricted by the edges of the dump, will eventually burn itself out. It could take several days or several months, this burning. In the end, it takes both: by the third day, the flames no longer reach five or six stories in height and the smoke is no longer visible from a mile away, but a slow underground smoldering lasts for months. Extinguishing the underground smoldering is left up to the men and their families, most of whom fled the dump for the surrounding streets. (Where the Leader is during this time is unknown, though his hacienda is mostly untouched by the flames.) After the fire, the men can be seen working in the dump surrounded by rivulets of smoke, the air bitter with waste. They work in the camp in this way for weeks, not taking weekends, not even Sundays—Sundays usually spent at home and in a church only a short walk from the dump. The church is not quite a church, at least not a church in any architectural sense. It is more like a basement in a building without any purpose. It's there that the men and women listen to the Padre's sermons, long, pious talks usually not related to the dump. Three months after the fire, when the men and women finally return to the Padre, the Padre speaks to his parish of the Hebrew Bible's Gehenna, a place that could be described, in essence, as a rubbish heap. It was there, the Padre says, where Jerusalem threw everything it wished to forget. In Gehenna, too, lived those who had left the faith: pagans, worshipers of Moloch. They may have even sacrificed their children there, the Padre says. One day, Gehenna, pernicious and toxic, burned uncontrollably. The Padre underscores the burning by hoisting both of his hands above his head and letting them hang in the air. Then he lowers his arms: *It is in the burning garbage of Gehenna that hell was born*. The parishioners do not miss the analogy. It is clear that the Padre disapproves of what was happening in the Leader's camp; however, it remains ambiguous, as it often

does in these circumstances, what exactly is to be done. All analogies—and for that matter, similes, metaphors, metonyms, and the like—retain a degree of ambiguity, interpretive wiggle room, and many of the parishioners wonder whether those who worked in the camps are like the apostates, or whether they are the good men and women of the faith, or, finally, whether they are the sacrificed children. In the absence of any direct instruction, the men and women of the dump return to their homes, pray, and await an answer they know will come. As they wait they take a spiritual inventory, i.e., a list of everything they have in a spiritual, not material, sense. Up until now they more or less thought the same thoughts, suffered the same guilt, shared the same fear. The exact nature of their thoughts, guilt, and fear I will keep private, because, unlike the Leader, this is all they have.

• • •

Conversely, what the Leader has is a matter of public record. Two parties are responsible for this record: the first being the Leader's accountants (he has two), and the second being the city police. The first record, the twenty-two-page inventory produced by the accountants, was once private—secret, in fact—until it was seized in a nighttime police raid. The second, a nineteen-page police report, was also once private, but became public in due time. When both records were made public, the police and accountants were surprised to find their lists were nearly identical. These inventories came to the public eye—and, in the case of the police report, came into being—mostly because of the fire. After the fire, the Leader's dump became an above-the-fold issue. The publicity, strangely, diminished the Leader politically; and authorities now believed it would be a good time to investigate his business. Later, these same authorities were accused of political favoritism because garbage dumps owned by other

Leaders whose empires did not burn for millions to see were not investigated. Regardless of the motives, four investigators were sent as undercover workers into the dump. After the fire, the Leader was hiring, and the four investigators were chosen along with sixteen other men to help quell the smoldering. While in the dump, the investigators noted the living and working conditions. They wrote reports, some of which verged on novelistic. They noted the Leader's hacienda atop the one-mile-long hill of garbage. They ate with the workers at night and sorted and incinerated garbage during the day. They kept track of workers' caloric intake, alcohol intake, drug intake, water intake. They noted that his collectors used no gloves, never had. In reports filed to the police commissioner, the Leader's conveyor belts were described as never having been turned off, even during blackouts, because the Leader had three generators capable of running the entire operation on diesel. The reports, and the subsequent news articles about them, caused a stir in city government, among the public, and, logically, in the dump. After the publication of the articles, the Leader was said to have had his security improved. He was said to have had two of his men killed, men who were suspected of helping the investigators. The four investigators, after completing the case, have moved on to investigating a corrupt labor union. One is eligible for retirement next fall.

• • •

The Leader has a Beretta 98 in his holster at all times. The Beretta is an accessory. The Leader has no use for a Beretta because the Leader employs close to twenty bodyguards. They are beefy men, men who could double for bikers and moonlight as kidnappers. Unlike the men who work in the garbage dump, the bodyguards have seen the Leader; they know he exists. Unlike the Little Leader, they can see the

Leader through clear windows, crossing from the staircase to the living room—soccer or the local news or pornography playing on the fifty-two-inch flat-screen. Some days they can see him in his lap pool, his back and arms heaving strokes from one concrete edge to the other. Some days, weeks, they don't see him at all. The bodyguards spend no time with the Leader, though all of this looking and watching could be called a kind of spending-time-with. As is common in this country, the Leader seems not to see his subordinates, but the subordinates see their boss. The bodyguards know something about him, they think. They think they are the men who know him best, his habits, his vices. Sometimes they will watch him firing his Beretta into airborne clay ducks, or they will watch him clean the Beretta, oiling its parts, scrubbing its holes. Sometimes they will see its L-shaped form laying on the glass table, then picked up by one of four maids, all of whom circulate through the house, polishing and scrubbing, mindful to keep any firearms away from unwanted hands. To whom these unwanted hands belong is not known, because, during the day, the Leader receives no guests, cares for no children. That's not to say that he has no children—he claims to have a hundred and twenty-five, of which forty-eight are confirmed—but none live in his house. The Leader has a wife, Alejandra, but she bore only two of his offspring. Perhaps the unwanted hands are hers. The rest of his children were borne by the women of the camp, women raped during nights while numbed by flunitrazepam. Later generations of girls and women have presented themselves more easily to the Leader, though perhaps not willingly. Most of the children live in the camp; they, like their surrogate fathers, do not see the Leader. Some of the oldest children are now mothers and fathers themselves, and since the Leader reveals no signs of his paternity—no Christmas presents, no favoritism—many are unaware their fathers are surrogates. It's not clear why the Leader has confirmed

that he fathered forty-eight children, because this paternity has not stopped him from impregnating some of his own daughters, thus leading to a multitude of birth defects and medical complications. It's not that he has begun singling out his own daughters; it is simply that there is no pattern as to the women the Leader selects. In other words, he is indiscriminate. Most of the violence occurs in his house, a hacienda with seven bedrooms, as many bathrooms, nine flat-screen televisions, the lap pool, an electrified perimeter fence, and a four-car garage holding two bulletproof sports-utility vehicles, a bulletproof vintage Porsche, and a bulletproof Mercedes-Benz. Women are brought to the hacienda for parties, usually by the bodyguards, though in some cases the husbands of the camp present their wives as offerings. Often, this is done to settle a debt or right a wrong. At night, the men in the camp can hear the sounds of music and voices and champagne corks and gunshots. The lights are on, the curtains closed. Since the women have seen the Leader, and the men have not, the men will selfishly ask one of the victims for a description of the Leader. The women do not respond or will simply say, *I didn't look at him.* One imagines that the existence of sons and daughters of the Leader would, in turn, confirm his existence to the skeptical younger men, but the flaw in this thinking stems from believing these illegitimate sons and daughters exist in the eyes of their parents. They do not. These illegitimate sons and daughters, despite their lineage, form a second, unseen subclass within the camp. They are usually not spoken to or fed, and if the family needs to make extra money, they are sold into some form of slavery. The incestuous offspring of this generation is treated even worse and is often killed or disappears in the first few months of life. None of this procreation, incestuous and otherwise, made it into the police reports filed by the four undercover investigators, because, as good Christian men, they, too, have their limits.

It did not make it into the press for some time, either. Like the parents, the Leader's wife also holds the illegitimates in contempt, and like the press and police, she makes no mention of them. She has contempt for the Leader, too. As years turn into decades, and the number of rapes compound into the hundreds, Alejandra's income from the Leader no longer appeases her. She spends most of the year at her private beach, a five-hour drive from the city, where she swims drunk and high, with less—but by no means absent—surveillance. In a way, her life is her own: she has the lovers she wants, the drugs she wants, the money she wants. But this can only gratify her for so long. If Alejandra spends any time at the hacienda, it is in order to clarify a business matter or collect a debt. She does not attend the Leader's parties; she does not speak with or about him. And when she is at the hacienda, the maids are careful to remove the firearm from the table, knowing, as any good dramatist might, that a handgun left out is a handgun to be used. But if Alejandra fires the pistol, it would be her first time doing so, and it is uncertain she would strike her target. She dreams of assassinating the Leader while she travels alone with her two children, both of whom are in their teens and live in elite international boarding schools during the year, summering with their mother in Europe, mostly to resorts in Switzerland, though last summer was spent in northern Sweden, where they enjoyed long walks by the sea during the eternal northern days.