

All five went together. It was November and it was getting darker outside every afternoon so they decided to bring extra flashlights, poor Deirdre thought her phone would do but the battery would pack up too soon as she would later find out. They all managed to fit in Brian's car and drove for sixteen hours and out of the five of them only one couldn't drive so it was Carl's job to keep spirits high whilst the others took turns behind the wheel.

It wasn't wise to ask for directions once they got a little closer and they were careful to not attract any attention so George drove the last two hours as he was the most vigilant and steady when driving. Carl did his best throughout the journey but as they pulled into what looked like the right place he was fast asleep across Brian and Deirdre in the back seat. Linda was rotating the map and tilting her head in the passenger's seat making sure the location was correct. She took out the folded piece of paper with the address written on it for the twentieth time to make sure it matched and finally, reluctantly nodded to George that it was fine to stop where they were. They were in a part of the country where you couldn't tell the difference between dirt tracks and roads making the map harder to decipher but Linda gave the ok to stop. Just as they got up out of the car two streetlights turned on, they had made it in good time.

The car was parked by the side of a road and opposite them there was one old shop probably left empty for years, the colours of the sign all faded. An abandoned petrol station next to it and just in view behind that, past overgrown shrubs and uncut grass was a large gate. The gate was the entrance to a town, with an arch high enough to let a lorry through and the pillars either side square thick and engraved with old isometric scenes of early agriculture, the ivy winding around them carved into the same stone. All dirty and stained making the details in the pictures easier to see. Atop each pillar was a stone figure, the figure on the right was a soldier holding a rifle as if it were a staff and there was a large fat pig next to him almost up to his waist, both stoic, staring ahead. The figure on the left pillar was a farmer and she in one hand held a whip and in the other a bunch of leashes that held back a pack of straining eager bloodhounds. There was Latin inscribed in the arch, nothing so far was peculiar and they deliberated what the statues could mean as Brian ran his hand over the stone remarking on it's quality. Deirdre used her flashlight to get a clearer look, it was darker now, the shadows over the figures gave them a sallow look, typical of stone perhaps. They all ambled across the threshold of that gate into streets of rows of houses, all grey and anaemic, all uniform. One main road ran through the middle much wider than the rest. The windows of all the houses looked boarded up until on closer inspection the brown grey boards were actually dust and grime gathered over what Brian estimated at being more than eighteen years since anyone had been there. Carl took a corner of a plastic bag he fished out from inside his backpack pulling it over one of his fingers like a glove and drew a line onto a window. The clear glass underneath gleamed silver such was the contrast with everything else.

George swung his backpack over onto his stomach taking out a black metal housing and attached a 35mm lens to one end of it. He fiddled for a few moments, the others gave him some space as he gestured with his fingers at the window to the others so Carl took out a card from his wallet, a plastic library card and scraped away the dirt from the window, his hand still in the plastic bag. Some of the dirt was dry and fell away, other parts were greasy and as it piled onto the card he smacked the excess onto the ground. The bare window was now clear enough so they could all peer inside, cupping their eyes against the glass and scanning the interior of a living room. Linda quietly commented to Deirdre that they would need to make some kind of system as there were more than five hundred houses here, would it even be possible to go through all of them and how would they know what they were looking for? How long would this take, possibly days? They looked at each other and Brian approached them giving a consoling smile. This excursion was only decided upon the previous day and each was uncertain about what was going to happen next. The thought of staying here made Deirdre's stomach turn as it did Brian's even though he hadn't heard Linda's current suggestion of camping in the town who herself was now finding the idea of sleeping here ever less attractive the more she scanned the dead streets.

It was past six in the early evening and quite dark, they had made their way only a little way down the road, about eighteen houses in. Looking back they could see the clean streaks on the windows reflecting silver light inexplicably like metallic graffiti. As George took the pictures trying to see into each window Carl and Deirdre covering him with a blanket to cut out any reflections from the window. Brian and Linda walked further along surveying what lay ahead scoping any potential surprises, mostly unwelcome ones. They would have to enter one of the houses at some point and neither knew what could happen if they did. It was cold now, the street lights where they had parked were the only light so they hoped for a moon though neither had been following the cycle. Linda thought they should be cautious of using the flashlights as they could be spotted from far away. Carl relayed this to everyone else and they decided to work in the dark with their lights on the dimmest setting from that point on.

8pm. Deirdre went back to the car and brought back two large flasks full of coffee and what appeared to be sandwiches. Brian and Linda spotted her from afar and made their way towards the others. They sat on the ground off from the main street. It was pitch dark now and colder, Brian pulled a large empty jar out from his backpack and put a flashlight inside it facedown and put the jar into a red plastic bag and tying a knot before turning it upside down onto the ground to form a makeshift lamp. The pink light gave them some feeling of warmth in the festering cold that was now wet to the bone. They sat almost huddled and Carl was very awake now, he hated long road trips. He made a joke about these parts of the country and the types of people you find here. It was harmless and it made everyone relax, their inner fears lighter and made welcomingly trivial. It was just past nine in the evening now, they ate their rolls and drank coffee and smoked cigarettes. Linda had a miniature flask of whiskey which they all had a drop from and it was enough to fire their cores for some moments. They sat in silence for a while, Brian warming Linda's hands with his and George going through the pictures he took on his camera. He looked around at times sensing a need for caution and began to relax less and less. The concern grew over his face the more he flicked through the thumbnails on the back screen. Carl and Deirdre began discussing what they will do that night. Deirdre announced that it was probably best to sleep in the car if only for this night. They agreed to drive for twenty minutes or so and park somewhere near the main roads so not to be too close to the town overnight. George decided they should meet at 11.30 pm by the first junction off from the main road and as he pointed to it it seemed uncomfortably distant.

Not much happened that night but there was something calm about this adventure into the unknown. The group went about what they thought they were supposed to do with the immense empty streets laid before them having not entered one of the houses yet even though George was intensely labouring over the pictures he took and then looking curiously at the streets. Linda noticed his studious and furrowed brow as he scrolled through the thumbnails. She dared not ask what he was contemplating. Herself and Brian had already counted twenty streets going off each side of the main road which they could see no end to though they had passed through two roundabouts sporting tall thin stone fountains spotted with black mould. They looked like they could have also been flagpoles. They now realised that there were thousands of houses. She walked with Brian hopeful he knew what to do, the others looked busy and intent. Linda had no real desire to find anything here as she had the image of that pink light from the lamp and the embers of her cigarette from earlier that night floating around in her mind. In the distance George raised his arm, Brian looked at his watch and it was eleven thirty so he nudged Linda. She startled out of her daydream and they walked back to the car. George drove carefully to the exit of a town further ahead and that night they slept in a very cramped car covered in sleeping bags and blankets and coats. Carl and Deirdre entwined in the passenger seat set all the way down, Brian curled up in the back corner, George in the back seat also, his long legs sprawling for extra room and Linda in the driver's seat slid all the way forward with a pillow on the steering wheel. The air inside the car hung thick and stale from all the breathing. The steam and heat made it comfortable enough though only the couple would rest well. The rest whispered into the night about what they could do the next day and how to exercise proper caution as they proceeded.

In the morning Brian was the first to leap out of the car gasping for fresh air as the sunshine fired through the steamed windows glistening like foil. George rolled out and napped on the ground for a few minutes, the two of them had woken up with sore joints out of place more than the others. After a while three were outside drinking water from their rations, Carl and Deirdre still asleep, they seemed to have slept most comfortably. The rest decided not to wake them and drove slowly back to the town, Carl and Deirdre pretended to be asleep as they enjoyed the calmness and George's sympathetic driving. As they approached George was the first to notice behind the petrol station just beyond the gate.

Guys, look. Urrrgh oh no, what the hell is this?

In the morning light the streets and houses appeared even more anaemic from all the settled dust, it all looked like old dry concrete apart from where they had cleaned the windows from the night before. George exhaled deeply and slowed down stopping a little before he had planned to. They sat there peering out of the window as a line of coaches were lined up at the main street of the town with streams of people alighting and looking around in wonder. Families, social group excursions, a day trip from the elderly homes, even a school trip of nearly fifty children all with compasses and maps and clipboards ready to go exploring with some already petulantly climbing the farmer lady to inspect her dogs up close. Deirdre looked up from under Carl's armpit and on seeing the crowds of people forming spoke with a yawn unexcited,

Well that's the end of that then.