



(illustration by Sidney Teles)

The Riller

by Matt Gillick

The following events mark an attempt to contain the condition prevalent amongst the young, an inherited infection known as RILS: Rebel Insurgent Legacy Syndrome: those infected are commonly known as Rillers. The containment was only partially successful because two spectors caused a disturbance. One was accounted for.

A rusted metal pillar crashed within an abandoned motor speedway. Most of the crowd turned around, startled at the sudden impact. But after a moment, they continued to cross the highway bridge on their way to the Goodlands. Kiki and Morris were not startled and did not turn around. Kiki strolled along the edge of the bridge to get a clearer look at the neglected roadway below her.

Normally, she saw Morris only when they wore headgear. But now that his head was bare, she noticed two streaks of grey hair behind his ears. Even though the two of them were just 19 years-old, she wondered if his greyness was a result of their vocation. She had been an interspector (specter for short) in her quadrant for over a year but had been in training since age 13. Spectors were a paramilitary force groomed from the civilian population as a means to maintain order in the outer quadrants. They were instructed to uphold the general laws and protect populations from outsiders. No one allowed in past the gates.

Through her cracked sunglasses, Kiki saw a massive patch of forest known colloquially as the Goodlands, a place she and Morris had heard stories about since the troubles. Mom and Dad would whisper tales to her in the dark of candlelight. A place, they would say, that had creatures and vegetation thought long extinct. There had been tales of people from other quadrants coming here before, but they were only rumors and the sources for these stories were always indeterminate. She was told it was used for one purpose: Unity.

Another crash, another collective gasp. That corroding speedway was left to rot several decades prior. Stock car racing had lost favor when crude oil ran out. No more passing vibrations of whizzing engines shivering drunken onlookers. Kiki observed the massive crowd weaving around her and remembered what she learned in academy, holding her fists in a light clench. This many people all going to one place, anything could happen.

She was taken back to those early days at academy. To be a spector was a last resort for those who didn't fit into the quadrantal day-to-day. She had been wandering the streets, crying, wailing for days without food before being recruited. They trained in an old gymnasium that reeked of sweat and dust. The instructor came up to Kiki, cane in hand, and asked, "Now, what do you do when approached with an issue, of any kind?"

Her nervousness stumbled over her words for which she received a blow from the cane to the lower body. Her fellow trainees stared directly ahead. Circling around her, the instructor said, “Repeat after me. Know the issue...Locate the issue...”

At this point, he turned around for another swing that was greeted by a deflection. The 13-year-old girl grasped the cane and rolled to her right, pulling the instructor off-balance. Straining his wrist, he was forced to let go. She stood, cane in her hand now, and broke it over her knee saying, “Eliminate the issue.” The instructor nodded and said well done as Morris could not hold back a sniggering grin.

While flipping through the brochure that was provided to her on the transport bus, she saw Morris bump into a passerby where the two exchanged pleasantries. She grabbed his arm and pulled her friend back, deeper into the moving crowd.

“What was that for?” he asked.

“What do you think you’re doing? We don’t know him.” She pocketed the brochure.

Morris grimaced, “We’re not on-quadrant anymore. The broadcasts said we would have nothing to worry about. We’re safe. Are you excited at all?”

She stopped walking and grabbed him by the shoulders, trying hard not to shake him. “That doesn’t mean you should forget your training. What if we get separated and I can’t bail you out?”

“I can handle myself fine. You’re no more a spectator than me.”

“Oh really? Then how about those times I’ve caught you dozing off on lookout, remember?”

Morris searched for a deep cut, “I’m not your brother, you know.”

They stared at each other as dozens walked around them. Eventually, they both turned and continued forward, side by side. She took out the brochure again.

Admittedly, it wasn't just the ingrained habits from academy that fueled her agitation. There were a number of factors leading up to their argument. The fact that she, like the rest of the crowd, had never been away from home made her constantly wary. The fact that she, a spectator, was selected to go off-quadrant—to leave her post—felt like a direct refusal to follow orders by following this particular order. But that didn't seem to bother Morris. She remembered talking with her parents when the transport bus pulled up to her family quarters. She could still feel how tightly her hand grasped onto the doorframe. Her mother and father's weathered faces would not stop smiling at her.

"I'm nervous, Mom," she said. "What if I don't like what I see out there?"

"You'll return to us, soon enough, and it'll always be for the best. Didn't you hear the broadcasts? It's supposed to be fun, life-changing. You're part of a special group and you've become so well-reformed over the years that your father and I have welcomed you back into our home. But we understand stepping off-quadrant can be unsettling."

"I'm worried I won't do what's required of me—like when—"

"Kiki," her father interjected, "We do not dwell on the past."

She remembered waving goodbye from the transport bus. The guards threw scowls at Morris and her. Spectors were not well regarded outside their own quadrants, as the stories went. She noticed the eagle branded on their pristine uniforms. Comparatively, what the two spectors wore on patrol were blood-stained hand-me-downs. During that long drive, she saw a caravan of vagrants spill over the hills, holding up messages to *Turn Back*. The mud on their faces hid whatever true complexion laid beneath. Morris remarked, "Must be those wild cultists who

believe in the old ways.” It was the closest Kiki had ever been to an outsider and she stared dubiously. She was slightly irritated by Morris’s dismissive remark. The vagrants were dangerous because she’d been taught they were dangerous. She heard the guards stomping about on the roof of the moving vehicle. A window shattered, which was followed by a series of pops leaving a muddy vagrant strewn out and bloodied before anyone on the bus could even react. In these recollections, she recognized her overbearing attitude toward her friend, though she would not apologize for it. She continued to flip through the brochure to a page that read *A Time of Fun, Community, and Discipline From Within* and noticed a fine print at the bottom.

She nudged Morris and they exchanged a glance that wasn’t a mutual apology, but a recognition both were ready to let go and move on. Spectors were not afforded grudges. She spoke under her breath so only he could hear.

“Look, it says that *hydration capsules will be provided at the event* and we should *not be alarmed if you do not feel thirsty or hungry, completely normal—*”

“We’ve had ration packs like these before,” Morris interrupted. “You know there’s always side-effects.”

She continued, “*There may be a number of people who exhibit strange, even violent behavior which is a common side-effect of a condition known as RILS (the infected are known as Rillers)—What’s that—and it says Do not be alarmed.*” She felt a twinge of suspicion, like catching a moving shadow by her quadrant’s outer gate while on first watch, unable to discern friend from foe. She fingered the scar across her lower neck.

“You worry too much,” Morris scoffed. “We’re off-quadrant for the first time in forever. I think we should enjoy this while it lasts. Wait, do you hear that?”

Reaching the end of the bridge, she heard music—or what she assumed was music—blasting like an air raid siren. The sound was so sudden and jarring it shook her chest. None in the crowd had heard live music before but were told tales of times when thousands would gather for just a single night and listen for a voice—a *voice*—to move them. She returned from her reverie after a passerby ran into her from behind. She saw the crowd still trudging onward, to the flowing patch of green.

Those in the crowd all had come from a similar station: a quadrant, a neighborhood of cracked two-story homes with basements converted into panic shelters, at least that is what made up Kiki's home quadrant: a borderland without much knowledge of the world beyond its outer gates. She would feel the chipped varnish along the walls of her family's panic room, trying to imagine how slick they used to be. They would get in a circle—all four of them close together—until Mom and Dad received the signal to meet the others at the gate.

Abandoned cars rusted on the side of the road below the highway bridge, their makes and models indecipherable. She nearly tapped Morris's shoulder to ask where he thought they might have been headed: part of a little game they'd play encountering remnants of the time before. A distant smokestack, a charred fuse box. It was a different story each time.

Guitars were tuned, synthesizers tested. Musical notes shed pollen off the Goodlands forest and into the dry summer air. Kiki estimated at least 30,000 people were in attendance. Spector academy taught threat level estimation. She recognized several of these people from primary practical where they learned how to construct barricades and cook meat in unideal conditions. But with many years separated from them because of her training, she doubted they recognized her but was glad to see so many had made it this far. It meant she was performing properly. Kiki retained in her training that one could sacrifice anything in order to stay alive. Her

parents were spectators of a sort (they didn't have a name back then), how they'd use old kitchen pans as shields and chest plates. She remembered as a little girl seeing smoke gathering at the main gate and a siren crying out. How there was no training, no academy back then, only pure instinct.

The crowd snaked forward, past an initial wave of observant security. They were armed with clubs and frisked every individual. Ushers stood along steel guard rails, waving everyone along. "Put out your cigarettes and empty your pockets. Everything will be provided."

Near the front gate, there was a tremor of whispers making its way through the queue. Someone was pulled out of line. Two guards checked his bag while another two bombarded him with questions. Kiki and Morris craned their necks to see.

A few moments passed and the young man's voice grew loud, "Why're you singling me out? What have I done?"

Security gave a silent answer, pulling out a contact lens case and a saline solution tube from his bag. The young man's face went white. One guard snickered before yelling, "Contraband!" A quick nod and three officers wrestled him to the ground. Once the young man was taken out of sight, Kiki came to the realization that she never asked herself if this trip was voluntary. Not once did this question enter her mind in the weeks prior to the event. Broadcasts played across the quadrant with ambassadors going door-to-door: *Don't forget to send your exit application. Don't miss out on the Goodlands trip.* They were delivered in a tone that if anyone elected to decline, they should be ashamed. Even when she was scanning the darkness beyond the outer gate, looking for moving shadows, she bore no inquiry until that moment in line. As a spectator, it shouldn't have even been a question, but it wasn't an answer either.

They approached the check-in gate which was under a tent. A long table showed the letters: A-E, F-J, K-Q, and so on. Each of the ushers carried a clipboard and wore a blue t-shirt with that familiar golden eagle sloppily embroidered on the sleeve. Kiki recognized the emblem. It was branded on the sides of the transport buses. These volunteers were imported from outside, from a land she could not even think to imagine, far away from her hinterland.

The music grew louder and more fluid with each step. Unlike what she listened to on her mp3, a device she told no one about, not even Morris. It was shabby, basically rubbish when she first found it among a dissenter's contraband. The screen didn't even work, only the power and play buttons, she didn't dare touch the volume wheel. She'd play it while lying under her bed, looping through the only three songs. Her favorite was "The Clearest Blue (Acoustic)" by Lauren Mayberry: *Shaped by the clearest blue...tied to the shifting ground*. She played that song so much the file skipped around the two-minute mark. They approached the final wave of security. A guard, again, lightly frisked her and ordered her to peer over his right shoulder while he pulled out a cylinder. It shot purple spray into her eyes and violet splotches filtered her vision. The two spectors were moved along in a frustrated daze.

Coming out from under the large tent, they saw the volunteers handing out what looked like twist-off liquid packets. Kiki was instructed not to open until directed. She then passed under an archway sign that read *Welcome to the Goodlands*. The music moved in and around the air and she speculated how quiet this place would be if the notes didn't skulk between the trees. Life would be so still and ever-present, surrounded by walls of high oak and sycamore.

The two walked through a bottlenecked gravel path. There was a calm, quizzical silence that wasn't apprehension or anxiety, but something in between. Most in attendance hadn't seen trees of such height and girth in their whole lives. She then came upon a massive opening of

Astroturf green. What had been there before had since been grinded into a soft, verdant flatness. Was this grass? she thought, and heard herself say, “This can’t be the real thing.”

Morris stammered, “Doesn’t this look like what we read in those texts at that dissenter’s hovel. Remember those...what were they? Poems? It said so on the covers. Remember reading them? It was our first patrol—”

“Yes, Morris. Be quiet for a second.”

She indeed did remember. How the dissenter’s knife sliced her under the collarbone. In the moment before the attack, she thought about how heavy those books felt in her hands. Such texts were forbidden, but back then, as newly conscripted agents of their quadrant, they were as green as the flattened plot they now walked upon and gave into temptation. And she remembered how Morris responded to her attacker. As soon as she sustained her injury and collapsed, her fellow spectator pounced on the dissenter and broke protocol. Instead of immediately restraining him and waiting for backup, Morris broke every bone in the man’s face and gouged out an eye. He was promptly disciplined for excessive force, sentenced to a month of hard labor, clearing debris and bodies from the outer gates. As soon as Kiki recovered and Morris returned to his regular post, she made it her goal to guide him so that he would serve as a respectable enforcer of the general law. But he was already losing focus walking over the spongy green ground; and so was she. She felt at the scar again.

The bright summer sun singed the backs of their pale necks and Kiki’s hair felt like hot copper coils. There were stages in every direction, playing all sorts of music. Encircling them were pockets of propped-up tents with signs over the flaps reading *Relaxation Chambers*.

In the bluest sky—*The clearest blue*, Kiki hummed—were hovering grey dots. Drones. The music suddenly stopped. A nasally voice came on the loudspeakers, jarring her back into focus.

“Attention! Attention! Would everyone please make it to the main stage. We have an important announcement. If you don’t have a capsule pack yet, notify the nearest volunteer.”

Kiki observed there were collections of armed guards along the edges of the crowd. She looked to the sky to find the drones continuing to scurry about. She could feel the music’s vibrations, but still, she could not shut off the part within her that spotted danger on the darkest of nights and brightest mornings. The main stage had an array of instruments. There was a jagged drum set and musicians floated around it. The nasally voice waited for everyone to settle into a compact order.

“Welcome to the Goodlands! Are we having a great time so far?”

A long-haired guitarist jumped at the microphone’s feedback, but Kiki didn’t notice. She sweated through her fingertips at the thought she was about to hear music in real time. And soon, she felt another onrush of guilt for abandoning her trained mentality. Guilty of being too distracted to act accordingly if a situation would have required her response. She nudged Morris and he ignored her, or simply didn’t notice.

“Alright, great! Now, you’re here to change your life and we’re here to make that happen. You have all been called and we are thrilled you’ve answered. You are all about to hear music from long ago in the way it used to be heard. We’re here to entertain. To instill hope in our future. To inspire. To employ past ideals tailor-made for our order. So, give yourselves a big hand for being so special...Aren’t we having fun!

“Everyone, please hold up your capsule packs. If you do not have one, raise your hand and a volunteer will get to you...Don’t be shy...We’ll know if you don’t. Now, before you uncap, there’s some legalese I need to go through. *The hydration capsules may induce side-effects of euphoria and out-of-body experiences. Do not worry, this is completely normal. Other side-effects may include deep introspection and emerged memories. Again, completely normal.*

“If you do start behaving erratically, we will keep you safe as we always have. The first sign of the condition can be strange, even violent behavior which could also mean a physical mutation. Please do not try to hide your condition. There is nothing to fear. Anyone who attempts to conceal the condition will be escorted off the property to a secure location and properly attended to.”

He finished by adlibbing, “Now that we have all that out of the way, carefully take off the caps. On the count of three, I want you all to think happy thoughts and drink. Be aware, we’re recording this.” He pointed up to show the drones now hovering in a circular formation like they were holding a large net. Kiki saw each drone had a camera and a small nozzle underneath.

“Okay...1-2-3!”

The two spectors uncapped and sucked down the lemon-flavored zest. The taste triggered her memory to a time the quadrant resorted to drinking stale flavor enhancer when the water got tainted. “Careful that’s all you have for the week,” she would say to Morris after seeing him guzzle down three to four packets.

“I like the taste.”

Bitter saltiness lingered in her mouth for only a few seconds. Morris turned to Kiki and asked, “Have you started feeling everything yet?”

“I think you meant to say *anything*.”

Morris looked confused, tilting his head. He peered past her and saw something that made his eyes brighten with surprise and almost change in hue. He turned her around, “Nah. Look, that’s a goat...walking by. An actual. See it?”

“Mo, there hasn’t been livestock since—”

He moved past Kiki like she was vapor. “Gam and Pops talked about fields of grazing green, as far as you could see...and it’s all here. The red barn, the rolling hills. Three cows and a bull. It’s all moving, it’s all here. The bull’s horns are getting wavy, way too wavy—The way the dawn hits the hills, a morning blue. God, I wish Gam was here to see—Is that you, Gam?”

Morris stepped forward and stumbled over a peg supporting a relaxation chamber. The announcer’s parting words were, “If the stimulation is too much, head for a tent.” Morris lost track of his demonstration and did not look back. Kiki opened her mouth to call on him but as the words formed in the back of her throat—a rush—like the repeated hammering of a gong pushing vibrant waves to the base of her spine. She could feel her eyesight narrowing while looking at the crowd. Brightness in their eyes shone like circular mirrors. White and devastating. Her father’s words echoed. The past, the past. The music was quiet and muffled, like how her parents would talk to her on those dangerous nights, telling her to be quiet and get under the bed. They’d say, “Look after your brother, Kiki. Don’t let him out of your sight.”

She looked back for Morris, but instead, she saw a mass of people who’d lost their solidity. Tank tops floating where torsos should be—the blankness of their faces swished around her vision like oil in water. Sound returned—she escaped a vacuum and into a barrage of noise. The music’s ripples echoed and bounced off the air, passing through everyone like a wave, separating body from consciousness with every bass drop, then retrieved by a melodic chime or guitar riff. Kiki’s training instructed that she resist the stimulant washing over her. The same way

she forced herself to stay awake when she saw the blood pouring from her neck after that dissenter came at her with the knife. She had an encroaching fear as the trees moved and breathed when they were once still. She felt a hotness, a branding inside her stomach. It subsided but the sensation lingered as ember resin does to burnt buildings. She couldn't breathe, or she wasn't aware of her breathing. It coincided with the trees that turned to observe her, glowing purple and blue and whatever in between. A curious branch bent to listen and stare while she reminded herself to breathe in and breathe out—purple, now blue, now red. She could not hide from what she saw. She could not help but think of her brother, her father's echoing to the past.

From what she saw, the grass moved, developing into overgrowth moving over her toes, trapping them, then freeing them. Similar to when she'd rewind and fast forward a cassette of her brother walking through the park just days before it all burned down. Mom and Dad wouldn't keep a picture of him. Wouldn't even mention his name and she was forbidden to reminisce.

But he was so little—the grass was growing and overgrowing, up her legs. With one twitch, the vision shattered like glass. A memory unwanted, passing through. Then boomeranging back into the voices of Mom and Dad asking, Why couldn't you do this one thing? Those voices echoed her head while walking the cold, narrow alleys at just 13-years-old. Regretful, remembering how she failed. Days of wandering, of her parents not searching for her because she had failed as a daughter. Days of being totally lost, before she walked into academy—among the fellow abandoned, the unstable, the unfit; meant to be molded into agents of this order Kiki was born into. To be spectators was to embrace a penance or purpose, or purpose in that penance. Kiki had to close her eyes and now there were blues and reds flashing in the black, interjected by cries and ecstasies. The music stopped. Total dark. Voices—Come back here—Get out of the streets—They're coming—Where's your brother?

She opened her eyes. There was quiet. She was with her brother on a narrow street back home, her quadrant. At least how it used to look. People ran silently into their quarters as the ground began to shake. A flaming bottle flew through the air and into a home, bursting inferno. These were the troubles. Dust was gathering in a vortex cloud and it was hard to see. Kiki's mother approached from the side and the little brother ran off holding a raggedy stuffed rabbit. The only words she heard were, Where's your brother, Kiki? You were supposed to look after him.

He ran around with a smile and she went after him as he dragged the rabbit behind, kicking up dust. But she wasn't fast enough. The rumbling grew heavier. Pebbles ran along the ground. Rubble crumbled silently. The little boy turned around and smiled while Kiki still ran toward him and saw the tanks roll through. They didn't stop. One little wince and he was snuffed out. Then came another, another. Her mother pantomimed running up and down the street, helpless.

She closed her eyes and opened them again to find herself in the midst of all the tents, colors still altering reality, the music landing on her. She was angry at herself for conjuring up the memory. For distracting herself. But she could not help but feel the synthetic liquid moving through her and bubbling the hard bedrock of her trauma. Kiki called out for Morris, but her words felt muted. The relaxation chambers went on for hundreds of yards, like a mirror in front of a mirror creating an infinity mirror where she thought, in the distance, (and beyond that distance) there was another Kiki looking for her fellow spectator, madly confused as the tree branches danced.

Her head was beginning to hurt and hot droplets were hitting her feet. She was crying. The stimulation was too much. She poked her head into one of those small tents. On a cot were

two naked people, speaking in tongues and thrusting away. Kiki gasped and the woman on top spun around to reveal her eyes had turned an unnatural green like the ground beneath them. At least the spectator noted it as unnatural, though she was unsure why she thought that way. The woman on top laughed and muttered in some form of shivering English.

“You see what they do to us? They’re going to find me. You better hurry, they’ll be around soon enough.”

Kiki backed up in horror as the woman delivered several blows and bites onto the man below, bellowing sad revelations only she could understand. Blood everywhere. She ran out and tripped on a tent peg. She then heard heavy footsteps and her inner voice whispered, Run.

She crawled in between tents like they were prostrated alleyways. People were getting rounded up, herded. Some moved in groups, savaging through people, staying together before a line of guards with riot shields spearheaded through them. Even when broken up, they would claw at security until subdued and then dragged away. Their eyes were all green. Rillers, just like the fine print said, she thought. Those who did not exhibit this mutation (or hallucination) were stumbling around in docile euphoria. Burning through endorphins.

But why was she hiding? She wasn’t being anything other than herself. This was supposed to be completely normal. She kept crawling to see women being dragged by their hair, men zapped with stun guns. People beaten, wrestled down. A pull on her ankle and Kiki was whisked into another relaxation chamber that now felt more like a kennel.

She went quiet as a security squad moved past. The woman who dragged her inside was topless and developing a lobster collar sunburn. Two others were in a corner. One was a man mumbling to himself in the fetal position while a woman, in her own convulsions, tried to calm him down by petting his hair. She petted it with such fascination, the music seemed to exude

from his scalp at every stroke. The topless woman snapped her fingers in Kiki's face. Making eye contact, the spector saw that she and the other two had green eyes as well.

"You need to focus on me right now, this place is not safe. We need to find a way out."

"What?" Kiki asked, almost laughing and crying at the same time.

A smack across her cheek brought brief clarity. "Snap the fuck out of it," she said.

"These people, the reason why we're here, they're taking anyone who looks like this. They're taking them away! Understand? I don't know about you, but I don't want to be around long enough to know where they take us."

"They're taking you away? What's that to me?"

The lobster collar pulled out a small shard of glass to show Kiki's eyes in full evergreen. More guards passed by. She needed to remember not to let emotion get the best of her, but she kept hearing the whisper, Watch your brother.

"I'm one of you," she said as the woman took back the glass shard. Her head unconsciously bobbed to the music and the fetal man shook and sang along to a distant song he had no business of knowing.

*Step out into the sun
Skies above they radiate me
Lift up, carry the love
Do you know?*

"We need to find a way out of here," the lobster collar said. "Put these on." She handed Kiki a small case. Inside were different-colored contact lenses, Kiki's were brown. The other's were blue.

Still confused, the spector asked, "How did you get these inside? I saw someone get arrested for having these."

“Too many questions. But these aren’t going to get us past the gate, you know that dye they sprayed you with, that’s their failsafe. They scan you on your way out. For anyone they didn’t round up who might try to get out. Shit! this stuff keeps coming at you. Ignore the new sensations.”

“How do you know so—”

“Enough with the questions. Let’s go.”

“What about them?” And they looked at the pair on the ground. They were wrapped in each other like a den of mating snakes. A band was finishing their set and the music died, giving way to screams and elations. The topless lobster pulled Kiki into the light.

People were crawling, running, skipping. Some in a palsy position stymied by their own high. The light was bright and the sun shone through her like the initial, silent blast of TNT experienced up close—Kiki kept her shaking to a minimum. She was taught to never let the enemy see weakness. Though she was unaware of what that enemy was. Morris was nowhere to be found.

“My friend’s out there—”

“Shh,” the lobster collar hissed as she pressed themselves against a relaxation chamber while a limping Riller was tackled by two guards in front of them.

The green-eyed Rillers were being dragged away, writhing. Kiki speculated on reasons why they were being dragged away, or why she reacted to the capsule pack in this manner. Others sauntered in and around the crowd, unaware of what was around them. The music picked up again and drowned out the cries of please—help me—they’re killing us. She was concerned why the lobster collar, this particular Riller, knew more about this process than seemingly anyone else. The thought nagged at Kiki. But she didn’t have time to wonder. It was all about

regulating the ever-changing foundation underneath her. She ran through the priorities: Escape, survive, hide. The issues were clear, and she had to locate them but had not an inkling of how to eliminate them. They came upon a thin corridor flanked by trees. They had found another stage that was emitting an electric pulse of sonic power and bass neither had heard nor felt before. A crowd bounced in unison. Strobe lights flashed epileptic. Morris was still nowhere to be found.

The pair both stopped to marvel. The verbing manipulation of the baselines coupled with deliberate yet spontaneous riffs of high pitch. They moved closer into the crowd, feeling hot sweat flying off half-naked bodies. Kiki felt the smiling gaze of her brother lurking in the crowd carrying a handful of dust. Many embraced each other like an orgasm refusing to let go, keeping those seconds on repeat as the loop of the baseline moved through and below them. The figure onstage pressed at a soundboard, nodding his head. He raised his arms for the approaching bridge section which was set off by a triangle ding and gave way to a warbling drone. Security was lurking on the edge, waiting for any Rillers to come flailing out into the open in mid-breakdown looking for any semblance of quiet. In the chaos, the pair found an opening and jumped into the woods, going prone. They crawled.

“I never got your name. I’m Kiki.”

“Grace. That’s all we need to know about each other, until we get out, okay?” She rattled her head to straighten her vision.

“It’s got to be these caps making us paranoid. This could all be a mistake.”

Grace turned around, her back was fire red and bumpy with heat rash, “Then why aren’t we just like the rest of them out there? There’s something different this stuff does to us and people like you and me are getting picked off. Not them out there. They have no idea. This is the happiest they’ve ever been, not even seeing what’s going on. I know you’re barely holding it

together. Why does it feel like there's something more to what we're seeing, something we're missing?"

Kiki grew defensive while also alarmed at these questions, like they'd been a part of her soul, a gland never exploited, "Maybe we're just having a bad reaction."

Grace kept crawling forward, "Then where are they taking us?"

Grace kept her head on a swivel and stopped at random times to scan the area like Morris would on walkabouts. Kiki hoped to see him again, that they would both emerge from the woods under the cover of night, seeing his grin in the shadows, muddied but alive. Grace stopped for a moment while Kiki kept going forward, rubbing shoulders with the tree trunks, scratching her hands on brown and dead thorn branches. Her head ran up against a barrier. After sitting herself up, she reached out her hand and felt a flat plexiglass surface. No way out.

Kiki declared, "They got us boxed in." And in this revelation, the glass seemed to grow higher and higher like a waterfall filmed on rewind. They were trapped and the medication was starting to affect what she wanted to feel, dopamine rushes hit the base of her spine so while there was deep fear, her face could not help but smile.

Grace punched and scratched at the wall, even tried to scale it, but slid down. They could feel the music's vibrations stopping at the wall, pulsating to the touch. They heard a buzzing sound, like small propellers, just above the canopy tree line. The drones. Grace grabbed Kiki by the forearm and they made their way to a thicker pocket of trees, away from the wall. They crouched down, which made Kiki's body cue up to relieve itself.

"Shit. We'll have to find another way out," Grace said.

"Grace, I need to piss."

"Then go behind there and stay low. Guards could come around at any minute."

Kiki lowly stepped behind three large trees with moss interconnecting them. Then she heard the crackle of a radio and tried to stop urinating, but couldn't hold it anymore. It ran down her leg and to the upper thigh. The guard sounded off.

"I know you're there, come on out."

Grace emerged from a bush and feigned a bemused, over-medicated woman experiencing the harsh pump of the capsule, "Oh, it hits like waves."

Kiki crawled around the trees and out of sight, watching her red-chested guide swing her arms around, dancing to the faint music, while the black-clad guard had his rifle lowered but ready at the hip. He radioed his squad that he may have found a straggler, "Will report if in need of assistance."

"Careful with the Rillers, don't wander off too far."

"Check."

The guard started talking, almost reminding, to himself. "Gotta worry about the Rillers. Fucking animals. This one seems fine though...Excuse me, Ms. What day is it?"

"Doesn't matter what day it is. Come with me!"

The guard approached and told Grace to move along and get back to the event. Kiki saw that Grace's shaking increased like an electric jolt. The lobster collar's eyes were closed, trying to regain control of her faculties. Kiki began feeling the orange heat of that long-forgotten day, her brother waving at her, the ground shaking, being young, stone and still, stopping nothing, her mother falling to the ground wailing, calling out to her son.

"C'mon girl. I said move along."

Grace opened her eyes as she pulled out the glass shard from her pocket. The guard grabbed at her shoulder and she twirled around, cutting him under the ear. He lost his balance and fell backward.

“Alert—West section—Riller!—by the barrier—”

She quickly slashed into his neck again and again until the shard broke off inside the gushing wound. The guard twitched while holding onto his neck, blood pulsing out between his fingers. Grace let out a scream, a primal call, a regression she could not control. Maybe a call to other Rillers before a fluttering of leaves came rushing over Kiki’s head and sent Grace falling, a splatter of blood on the trunk behind her. And at this moment, Kiki finished urinating and covered her mouth to stop herself from screaming as well. She hugged the moss, digging the green under her fingernails. She heard a sniffing growl behind her. The guard’s dog. With her back against the moss, the hound barked and lunged for her. Recalling her training, she covered her neck with her forearm and let its teeth dig in. Once fully engaged, she took her free hand and scratched at its eye to no effect. Her arm continued to bleed, dripping on her face. She felt the skin tear. She then grabbed onto one of its ears and ripped it off. One yelp and it ran away, leaving Kiki to bleed, reddened and sunburnt. The sun was starting to go down and the blue-black shade of night came over her. It was quiet now.

Kiki remained in hiding and heard the propellers overhead, the crackle of the guards’ walkies. It took a little while to drag Grace’s and the officer’s bodies out of the woods leaving a trail of red. She didn’t make a sound, covering her mouth just like she used to during the raids when outsiders got past the gates, and Mom and Dad were sent to repel them. It was just a matter of praying your house wasn’t the first they’d get to.

“Are we going to be okay?” Her brother would ask.

“Mom and Dad will keep us safe.”

She had no plan and merely felt the zooming in and out like vertigo as generic guitar loops complimented a vocal harmony. She was able to see the amalgamation of bodies and trees all blend into one like it was under a microscope moving and unaware of its observers. She wondered if her instructor would say if he saw her now. The man’s words whispered in her ear as if she was back at the gymnasium while sparring with Morris, “A spector in its true form can observe, protect, and avoid detection all at once.” She sat herself up against the interconnected trees and closed her eyes to hear the sound of hooves upon wet fallen leaves.

Something with a snout approached, blowing, breathing hard. The dog—it had to be the dog. Another guard coming by to sniff out stragglers, there had to be. Then came a vibrating mixture of her mother and brother’s voices: Wake up, Kiki, don’t want to be late.

She opened her eyes to a grey fawn, though Kiki had no clue it was a grey fawn. It had the beginnings of antlers, like tumors. It was large, almost as tall as her. A thin, aerodynamic face expressing an ever-curiousness. At every one of its breaths came a sigh reminiscent of her disappointed mother when she’d miss curfew, a shake of the head that reminded of her brother when he’d rub away a sisterly noogie.

The grey fawn stiffened up at a sound Kiki could not hear and started to calmly walk away but turned around, encouraging her to follow. Keeping low and aware, she followed its graceful wobbliness. She heard the nasally announcer’s voice once again, asking if everyone was having a good time, again. Yet, she still could not understand why she, for simply being herself, was pegged down to the category of Riller. As if her life was moot before the Goodlands, her training a wasteful exercise. She felt guilty about leaving Morris out there, God forbid he became

one. He wouldn't last long before they rounded him up. Or if he put up a fight. The fawn stopped in its tracks.

There was a hole dug by the base of the plexiglass wall. Making herself prone, Kiki found a crumpled note next to a small aperture. It read *Going for help!* The fawn was nowhere to be found. No tracks. She dug herself through and she was out.

The woods were pitch black and there was peace, for a moment, until she heard a scream, not from the event, but from a weak source of light past a thicket of bush. As she got closer, she saw it was a medical tent with a line of people outside, some struggling with the guards. Others tried to run away but were quickly cattle prodded back into order. Some of the guards laughed while others stoically grabbed each person who fell out of line, each Riller who couldn't be controlled by suggestion or threat was given a shock collar.

Volunteers in the blue polo shirts remained as chipper as ever, telling the Rillers that this was all going to be perfectly fine. "You will be reborn. This is all done for your protecti—"

"Protection, we're being led like animals—"

Kiki could smell the sizzle of skin. The white tent was lit on the inside, and she saw a shadow forced into the chair and strapped in. There was a muzzle placed over a convulsing mouth. The tent lit up once more as the cattle prod got one more zap into whoever was being restrained. There was a new thread of anger within Kiki, purposeful and calculated, but felt her thoughts whisking about like pollen swirling around eyelashes. Even if she could assist, she'd be captured too.

Two shadowed people in lab coats held the restrained's hands and face against the chair while a third got out a hammer and a sharp tool similar to an ice pick. The muffled shadow was screaming, trying to move away from the approaching—a harsh click and crunching twist. The

restrained shadow went silent and limp for a moment, then twitched back into life. With a bandage wrapped around the head, it was guided sluggishly away. Kiki, in a delayed craze, exhaled a quiet scream of shock. But before she could recover, she heard a growl. It was that same hound limping along the tree line. It had picked up her scent. It seemed to stare through the darkness and gave that familiar growl before barking away. Some guards made their way over. There was an opening past the brush, but they'd run her down, her twitching muscles pulled her in different directions. So she ran back, retracing her steps to the noise she'd just escaped. Another tear forced its way down her face. More dogs were coming.

They were getting closer but if she could make it to the opening, she would have a chance to get lost in the crowd. Escaping was thinking too far ahead. They felt at her heels when she slid under the wall. Coming out of the woods, she noticed the music had stopped, the nasally announcer was back on the mic.

“Everyone! Thank you for coming. This concludes your Goodlands retreat. Follow the path from where you came and you will be admitted through the checkpoint. Thank you for coming!”

A sea of people made their way out, some more sluggishly than others, with some having bandages laced over one eye, appearing just as dazed but emptier. Kiki moved with the crowd, not hearing or wanting to overhear their conversations. Where was Morris? She didn't dare to call out his name or draw attention. She looked into the eye of every Riller that'd been corrected, dulled, and there was nothing staring back. She was coming up to the checkpoint which was a row of armed guards inspecting every person, spraying the purple dye into their eyes again. Every tenth person or so would get scanned and pulled to the side, wrestled to the ground, and dragged away. Someone up ahead was pulled away, screaming and arms flailing. She heard the

familiar rasp of Morris's voice. He was surrounded by volunteers—eyes green and shaking—
Guards were approaching with their dogs.

Morris, dirty and screaming, cried, "I'm telling you, don't touch me!"

The volunteers were trying to calm him down. More volunteers gathered and at a distance were two dogs lunging forward, held back by leashes. Morris bared his teeth and his green eyes cried with the knowledge that he was trapped. Kiki was close to approaching the checkpoint as a corrected Riller came wandering past Morris, so the spectator grabbed him and pulled a knife which prompted the volunteers to back away. The dogs were set loose and the guards moved in shouting, "Watch it, this one has a weapon!" The guard at the checkpoint remained at his post but was vigilant to the commotion. Everyone was staring at the spectator-turned Riller telling everyone to back up.

Morris held the knife to his hostage's cheek but that didn't stop the dogs from lunging at both. In mid-air, the first dog received a fatal slice to the throat and fell limp. The other managed to strike Morris's hostage in the throat, sending all three tumbling down with Kiki's best friend at the bottom of the pile. The dog ate away at the hostage's windpipe and the rest of the guards approached in a circular formation, fingers on the triggers. When one of them was close enough, Morris rose up and flung his knife, hitting a security officer between the eyes, and in a mad dash, the spectator hoisted the bleeding Riller onto his back as a shield while he went for the dead guard's gun. They shot at him but hit the hostage instead.

Morris got hold of the weapon. He fired on anyone that moved, innocents caught in the crossfire fell all around. The guard in front of Kiki finally drew his weapon and went into the chaos with no backup to take his post. Kiki slid through and kept walking, no one noticing. The gunshots were continuous, and Morris maneuvered constantly, weaving in and around a cluster

of falling, leaking bodies. She looked back but could not see him, but the guards were encircling him. Then they fired, then nothing.

Kiki walked with the silent crowd over the highway bridge as the metal pillars of the abandoned speedway continued to cry and crash. More gunshots. Then silence again. Crows cawed all around and she thought she could hear her mother, her brother.

*Notes: I did not come up with the term 'Riller'. That is a term coined by Patrick Mangan of Shrewsbury, MA. The lyrics featured are Oh Wonder's "Without You" and Chvrches's "Clearest Blue". This story was previously featured on the now defunct **bluntly magazine**.*