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## A short story

### *The Diorite Whales*

**Michael O'Laughlin**

At first, Jim thought he could go on as before. He got up at five-thirty each morning, loaded his tar-stained truck with industrial buckets containing extension cords, power saws, nails and hammers. He spent the entire week on a Pacific Heights rooftop, unrolling new roofing strips, nailing them down. Late Friday afternoon he finished tarring the nailheads around the rain gutters. When he leaned over the edge and lowered the tar buckets down the old climbing lines, he couldn't help but see the three floor drop in terms of achievable velocity. It wouldn't be enough.

He gazed beyond the neighborhood roofs to the Golden Gate. Speck-sized white sails dipped on the waves of the bay like flower petals tossed on the water. They reminded him of how cars used to look the higher he and Alex went on a climb in Yosemite. The vision brought back Alex, and those summers after he had saved Jim's life. Jim hadn't seen Alex in ten years. The last he'd heard was that Alex had gone to Death Valley.

Jim studied the drop from the bridge to the white caps. Too much time to regret it. A gun would be better. A gun wouldn't allow for second thoughts like a plunge from the Gate, and a bullet would be more reliable than a fall from a four storey Victorian.

He pulled off his work gloves, surveyed the completed roof. The routine seemed as if it were a sentence he'd been carrying out for fifteen years. For the labors of his life, he could show a house inundated by surplus roofing material, useless remnants adding up to an abbreviated lifetime of forgotten jobs.

He coiled his lines and pictured Alex's collection of guns. A gun could be a simple "off" switch ending the vacillations he felt be-

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tween resignation and despair. The trigger could be a switch thrown putting an end to his hospital visits and the truth Dr. Sinclair so directly stated concerning his life and what the good doctor called Jim's options.

Jim dropped his leather utility belt on the living room floor. He sank into the worn easy chair. He concentrated on the rhythm of his breathing. The walls gently pulsated with the red answering machine signal light. Jim hit the playback button.

"Jim, call me right away. If you get Molly and she says I'm not available, call admissions—" He yanked out the power plug. What service, thought Jim. The good old doc himself.

Jim ejected the cassette, slid it into his shirt pocket. When he crossed Towne Pass the next morning, Jim touched the tape to make sure it was still there, then took his foot off the gas and let gravity draw him into Death Valley. An hour after the sun rose white, a sheet of heat spreading over the desert flats engulfing Stovepipe Wells and Furnace Creek, steam billowed from his hood. Jim eyed the little white house a half mile away. It looked like the house the ranger at Stovepipe Wells had described. A few minutes later, with the front door of the house kicked wide open, Jim and Alex danced in a patch of dead cactus, knocking each other about, Alex shouting at Jim for not keeping in touch, Jim yelling at Alex for bouncing from park to park making it impossible for him to keep up.

Alex's hair was thinner, his face fleshier than Jim remembered it. He wore big boots and green park service pants, a t-shirt and a bullet-proof vest. A smell of coffee and toast came from the door of the house.

"Man, this land is dead," said Jim, taking in the cactus.

"Those are replants. Confiscated from people digging them up to take home. C'mon in. My God." Inside, Jim felt air pumped by a swamp cooler. "Cited them good," said Alex. "You wouldn't believe the horseshit excuses people come up with for breaking laws." Alex went into the kitchen. Jim heard coffee pouring. He looked at the framed pictures on the living room walls.

"Came through Yosemite last night," called Jim, his voice loud, his lungs swelled with the thrill of arrival. "They've ruined Camp Four. It's got a rock lined path now from the old parking lot into the campground, and the sites have these concrete logs dividing them up."

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"Figures," called Alex.

The framed photos captured rescues in Yosemite: one of Alex on a rope working a stokes litter around a rock outcrop, another of him in scuba gear about to enter white water. Alex came into the living room and handed Jim the coffee.

"Wish you'd told me you were coming. I could have arranged days off."

"I've got time."

They were both quiet a moment. Then they broke into laughs over being in the same room after so much time apart. Alex looked at his watch, shook his head. He buttoned his shirt and tucked it in, put on his gunbelt, squared his ranger hat. "I wish I could visit here a little longer, but I'll give you the grand tour tomorrow."

"Sounds like just what I need," said Jim.

"About time you burned out on the city."

Jim followed Alex out the door. The white sky pressed down upon the brown mountains. The heat was coming.

"Doesn't look like you have any neighbors."

"No assholes for ten miles in any direction." Alex climbed into his patrol truck. Jim watched him pick up the radio mike and speak into it. Alex waved and drove down the dirt ruts to the main road, the big tires raising dust.

Jim sat on a lawn chair in house-cast shade. The world looked better out here. There was no traffic, no clamor to get somewhere, no feeling that if you didn't hurry you might miss out on something. Later, the brush lost all shadow and the land baked. He surveyed the heat waves rippling the protrusions of ragged mountains. He wondered how long it would take somebody to die of heatstroke and how painful it might get. There was something clean about this place. Jim couldn't see lying in a hospital bed, ingesting chemicals while they took him piece by piece in a series of hopeless surgeries.

That evening, they barbecued steaks in front of Alex's house, watching the sun go down to the northwest of Tin Mountain. They took their plates and walked up the little rise to the summit and watched the last violet light of the day withdraw up the Amargosa Range and the Funeral Mountains. The mountains drew darkness into themselves. Alex said Death Valley was over a hundred miles long. It looked as if it were the lowest place on earth, like a drain where

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everything would eventually be sucked down. Dirt flows that had washed out of all the side canyons during flash floods over the centuries spread toward the center of the valley. Alex said they were called alluvial fans, and when Jim looked at them all together, down the hundred miles, Jim could almost put each geologic event together, and see the movement of the land, as if he were glimpsing two hundred years in the right now of his own moment. It was stunning when Jim suddenly saw it for what it was, a simple washing away of the earth. Jim thought it was possible that before any of the alluvial fans layered themselves again, every human being now living would be gone. It made him feel all right for a little while.

After dark, Alex asked Jim if he wanted to go shooting the next day.

"Sure," said Jim.

"We'll go outside the Monument, to the Saline Valley. There's a peak there we could climb."

After Alex turned in, Jim set up his bed on the sofa, then thumbed through the massive collection of Louis L'Amour's. Jim postponed sleep by looking at the framed photographs on the walls. He fiddled with the controls on the stereo system, then stood at the screen door as the moon rose over the desert. He took the cassette tape from his shirt pocket, slipped it into the stereo, plugged in the headphones and hit the rewind button. It stopped almost instantly, then the voice: "Jim, call me right away. If you get Molly and she says I'm not available, call admissions. We've got to get in right away. It's spread beyond—"

Jim took off the headphones and set them on the turntable. He went back to the door, back to the moon. He felt inside his shirt, his fingers running over the gauze that covered the wound Sinclair had inflicted when he took the biopsy, that little traitorous piece of him. The headphones squeaked a tinny little voice, imperceptible to Jim as words, just a puny static against the silence of the desert night.

Before dawn, Jim had to piss. The bathroom was off Alex's bedroom, and he didn't want to disturb him, so he went outside and climbed the hill to the place where they had eaten dinner. The moon was going down over Tin Mountain, and the length of Death Valley was buried in a silvery light.

Seventeen years before, Jim had stood on a ledge high on

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Angel's Heaven, peeing off into moonlit space. After four days of climbing, he and Alex were over two thousand feet up, their hands blackened by the handling of hardware, their fingers scraped and scabbed over from the repeated jamming of fists into cracks in the overhanging wall. Jim couldn't hear any contact below as his stream went off into the darkness.

"Yosemite Valley gives brief birth to yet another towering fall," he said to Alex.

"Miracle Falls," said Alex.

As Jim settled back onto the haul sack, Alex's voice came without warning, as if Alex had just been waiting for this moment. Jim listened to the voice in the dark and fingered the rope that tied them together.

"I'm walking across the parking lot at Curry Village," said Alex. "And I hear this distant sound."

He said no one else heard it, that the tourists weren't familiar enough with the valley to recognize a sound that didn't belong, and for long moments, he was not sure he had heard it himself. Alex snapped a radio onto his belt and took off up through the trees toward the valley wall. He climbed up the broken granite forming the great ledge that angled toward the rim of the valley. He avoided the gravel chutes, leaping from one outcrop to another, the radio bouncing crazily on his hip.

After two thousand feet of ascent, he halted for the first time. The sounds had grown clear, cries coming down like nothing human, a last objecting explosion before death. It was not language, only the voice of animal agony. When Alex spotted the victim sprawled on his back, he was sure the hiker had tumbled down three or four hundred feet of jagged rock. Ribs had ripped through his chest and shirt. One leg bone was shattered, twisted below the line of his hiking shorts, the other broken back against the normal bend of the joint. Blood still seeped from his head and body.

Alex drew the radio, hailed dispatch, told the operator he had a bona fide emergency. The man was alive but could not last long. Dispatch informed him that getting a helicopter out of Fresno would be impossible before morning. It would have to be a Stokes litter evacuation down the rock face. Alex keyed the radio.

"He won't survive it. And he won't last until morning. We need the chopper."

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The ledge now looked like a steep chute diving back to the valley floor, and Alex knew they couldn't risk a stokes litter evacuation in the dark.

"It's your decision, Alex," said the dispatcher. "Nobody's in the valley."

"Call the team."

In a second, the rescue horn sounded, waving its signal down valley.

While Alex waited, the man's wailing subsided. Alex climbed up next to the victim. He suddenly flailed an arm. Alex hugged him down. Soon, the hiker fell still. Alex backed away wiping blood on his jeans. The radio gave off a burst of static. The voice requested Alex. He responded.

"We have twelve guys," said the dispatcher.

"All right," said Alex. "We need oxygen. I know that much. Let's set a human chain up this cliff, ferrying oxygen bottles. We'll set up light flags every fifty feet to mark the route. We'll have to keep it coming all night. Over."

"You sure you don't want a stokes evacuation?"

"We can't carry him down. I'm not going to make a decision that I know is going to kill him. It's got to be a helicopter lift. If we can keep him alive until morning, maybe he'll make it."

"You sure that's the right decision?"

"I don't know goddamnit! I'm not a doctor! You find me one and I'll let him decide!"

The light flags were in place by eleven, and Alex administered the oxygen. Each hour of the night that passed, as Yosemite Valley's constellations of campfires went out one by one, the pulse of the hiker weakened, slowed. Five body recovery men huddled around the victim in the light of head lamps, trying to stem the flow of blood. The body bag sat folded on a rock.

"This is a waste of time," said one as he took off a soaked compress. "This guy's dead."

"You ain't God," said Alex. "We'll just sit tight until God decides." Alex watched the stars overhead.

"He's dead."

"He's still got a pulse," said Alex.

Before dawn, dispatch called, told Alex a US Navy helicopter had just lifted off from Fresno.

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"Let's do it," said Alex.

The team placed the stokes litter next to the victim, bundled him, all lifted together, eased him into the stokes, strapped him down. He opened his eyes suddenly, seemed to see the lights cast by the head lamps. Alex quickly pulled his lamp off, turned the beam into his own face just inches from the bloodied face of the victim.

"I'm God," he said. "You're not on my list. Go back."

He clicked the light off and his face disappeared in the darkness. The victim closed his eyes.

Alex checked his pulse again.

"He's still with us."

As the darkness faded to the east and Half Dome and North Dome cut black outlines against the violet sky, Alex heard the distant machine beat of helicopter rotors. A breeze rose.

"C'mon," said one of the team, standing up, searching west.

Then the lights of the helicopter broke from behind the valley wall, cutting a line through the dawn at an elevation several hundred feet above the recovery site. The men ignited flares. The helicopter closed. It dropped a line that slowly descended, a great weight of a hook attached to the end. The chopper crew maneuvered it into contact with the men on the ledge.

The recovery team fastened the harness of the stokes onto the hook, clamped it down, lifted the stokes clear of the rock and the chopper backed away. The stokes became a diminishing elongated speck on a thread, drawn up to the savior machine.

"Shit," Jim said on the ledge that night on Angel's Heaven while Alex pissed off into the same space Jim had earlier. "Who's the son of a bitch who wanted to write me off?"

"You fooled my ass," said Alex. "I figured it was just a matter of waiting for you to die. You're the biggest miracle this valley will ever see."

Jim sat in silence, those hours he could not remember at last filled for him, and it made him nervous about the next day's climbing. He kept thinking about how they were closing in on the end of the greatest climb they would ever do, and maybe Alex just wanted to get the story told, of the night Jim couldn't remember, in case they fell.

Jim didn't sleep anymore that night. The next day, they progressed higher onto the towering sheets of white granite. Jim baked

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in a torrid sun. His skin burned. His fingers were bloody from so much rope handling and hammering of pitons into cracks. His neck ached from leaning back, watching Alex, making sure the umbilical climbing rope remained taut. The hot wind blew their haul lines away from the face. The haul bag drifted below in the space of silence against the green backdrop of the valley floor. Jim followed Alex all that day into an empire of stone, climbing toward the union of rock and sky, inching toward the paradise of blue-white heaven. He felt stronger and stronger as the rock gave up the battle and fell under them. His lungs swelled on the summit as if he had broken through a boundary surface into a finer air. On that day, he almost believed they would never die.

They stood in the heart of the Saline Valley, a salt-filled basin whose dark surrounding mountains imprisoned heat. Alex loaded the guns, showed Jim how little kick the HK-93 had, and Jim fired the .357 magnum over and over again at the paper targets, missing every time, the bullets raising puffs of dust where they hit the ground. As Jim reloaded, he studied the tip of each bullet. He tried to feel the draw of its power, the old enticement toward what the world would call tragedy. He tried to imagine the bullet piercing his skull, the collapse of his body into the sand he would not feel, but it was a dead rooftop dream. He looked at Alex carefully reloading the magazine for the HK, meticulous in his handling of the weapon to ensure no accidents. Shooting himself would be like shooting Alex, shooting the man who was once again showing him the wonder of another world, as he had in Yosemite. It was his gun, his desert. Jim couldn't fit the fantasy of his suicide into the peace that Alex had built for himself in this land.

Later, Alex pointed to an almost indiscernible trail leading up through ancient rock baking in the sun. "That's Ubehebe Peak, and that's all that's left of an old trail. We'll take the guns with us. They're too valuable to leave in the truck." Alex read his official temperature box. "Hundred and nineteen," he said.

Jim pulled the bill of his cap down, pressed his sunglasses tighter to his eyes. He tied a brown bandanna around his neck, then slipped his arms through the loops in the leather shoulder holster. Alex handed him the long barrel .357 magnum. Jim checked all six empty bullet bays of the cylinder. He holstered it, snapped it down



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with the cross hammer strap, as if he had been strapping on shoulder holsters all his life.

"As we gain elevation," said Alex, "the temperature should drop. The view up there is worth the climb. You can see all the way across the Inyos to the Sierra."

They locked the doors of the patrol truck. Alex held the HK by the handle atop the black barrel. Jim carried water, a survival kit, ammunition. Their boots crunched through dry soil into softer dirt beneath, raising puffs of dust. After only a few minutes, it felt as if they were walking up a heated surface of metal in the interior of an oven, but instead of doubting the wisdom of climbing a peak in Death Valley in July, Jim found himself enticed by the remote possibility of his body failing in the heat. Maybe he would just keel over and die of heatstroke. He would never have to see Dr. Sinclair again.

After a mile of climbing, a small stand of rocks just off the trail offered a sliver of shade. Alex and Jim sat breathing hard, like lizards in hiding. Alex held the lightweight temperature box up, peered through the opening in its side. "Hundred seventeen," he said. "Cooling off."

"We're insane," said Jim, removing the cap from his water bottle and taking several long swallows.

"Always have been." Alex took the plastic bottle.

Jim's head had begun to throb. The sky looked impossibly distant against the summit of the mountain.

A thousand feet up, the view widened to take in the entire length and breadth of the Saline Valley, and now they were high enough to see the overall pattern of the rock and sand debris that had washed out of the side canyons, spreading toward the center of the valley. Jim felt as if he were outside of time, in the miraculous second of his observing, seeing that which had taken thousands of years of process. Here he was, so brief in his human life, that the mountains could not see him, because their lives were on so much more grand a time scale. When he looked at the thread line of jeep road in the Saline Valley, cutting a clear but inconsequential mark across the geologically brief alluvial fans, Jim wanted to laugh at the puny effort of the road in marking the land. The mountains sat in the sun, unimpressed.

Jim's legs ached with the ascent, but after another hour, the sky seemed to be winning out against the land. The trail suddenly be-

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came clearly lined by rocks, and in the steep sections, blocks of stone had been placed as steps. Just off the trail, a shovel lay in the sun; a pick, a sledge hammer, a rusted wheelbarrow. Jim stood staring at the tools.

Alex said, "I've been working on this on my days off for the past three years."

Jim pictured him driving the miles of rocky dirt road to the Saline Valley each day, making the climb; Alex, working. It must have made him feel like the last person on the planet.

"You pushed that wheelbarrow all the way up this mountain?"

"Just thought I'd make it safe."

"For who?"

Alex looked down the mountain. "I don't know. Not many people come out this far."

Jim looked at the last blank section that separated the rebuilt trail from the summit crags. "You're not finished."

The summit climb went hand over hand for the last hundred feet, the sky sweeping in on all sides. Then they stood on top of the peak, looking down the opposite side into a deep bowl that bottomed out into a perfectly flat playa, blemished only by a tiny stand of black rock like a mole in a stretch of flawless skin.

"That's the Racetrack Valley," said Alex. "This time of year, temperatures are pushing 130." Alex lifted his binoculars and scanned. "Planes land down there. Dropping off drug shipments out of Mexico."

The playa stretched several miles, a couple of miles wide, perfect in its white formation except for the tiny stand of black rock.

"How far down?"

"About a two thousand foot drop. What're you thinking?"

Jim kept staring at the tiny black rock.

"There's a half assed trail like the one we came up. It'd take a couple of hours to get down. But climbing back out over this mountain. That could take some serious time." Alex shook his head. "We don't have enough water."

"There's a road in?"

"It's a long way. We couldn't get in there till about dark, and we're talking maybe seventy miles of dirt to get to it."

"What if I went down by myself? And you head back to the truck? You can drive around and pick me up."

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Alex looked north, scanning the geography. "I could do it by dark. That'd be my patrol. Wouldn't have to come back into the Racetrack Valley for another two or three weeks."

"I'd like to see those rocks close up."

Alex focused on the black rock. "It's a stand of diorite. I was in there a few years ago with a guy who said he was a geologist."

"Is it big up close?"

"It's huge. But it's not that short a walk out to it in serious heat. Distance across playa is deceiving. They don't take official readings out here, but you could be talking 125 or above."

"You mind making the drive to pick me up?"

Alex looked off both sides of the peak, at the mountains north that he would have to drive around. "No. I don't mind. I'm used to picking up your carcass." He smiled, then pointed down at a low saddle. "That's the way down. Take the temperature box, and find cover if the heat hits 120."

When Alex started down, he went much faster than before. Jim watched him until he became a barely perceptible speck moving in the desert waste. Then Jim drank some water and picked his way down to the end point of the trail where Alex had left his tools.

Jim lifted the pick. There were sharply angled chunks of rock all around. He spotted one that looked about the size of a staircase step. He dug it from its gravel base, rolled it over and over, set it in place above the last bit of trail, braced it with smaller rocks, jumped up and down on it. Then he set another, then another. Jim worked for almost two hours, constantly drinking water, his sweat dripping onto the stones. His head pounded. He squeezed his temples, trying to relieve the beginning of the pain that he knew must be heat exhaustion. Then he spotted a rising line of dust down in the Saline Valley, drawing along the threadline of road, headed north, tiny, almost indiscernible in its movement.

The wind blew a furnace-like heat out of the Racetrack Valley. The temperature increased as Jim dropped a thousand feet off the summit of Ubehebe Peak. The dot of rocks elongated on the ancient lakebed grew into relief, became a black scab on the white earth. As he crossed the last mile of trail toward the valley bottom, it rose like a dark phantom ship adrift in a sea of endless sand.

The mercury in the shaded thermometer box read 126. He

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headed for the shelter of a nearby rock. A half hour in the narrow shade dropped the mercury twenty degrees. He remained in the shade for another hour hoping the declining angle of the sun would ease its ferocity. He closed his eyes for long periods. The black rocks sat too, like a grounded ship, immobile.

Later, he moved swiftly down the final slope of the peak through a graveyard of fallen rocks and stunted brush that grew from ashen dust. The trail met the dirt road where it skirted the mammoth playa. A five-foot-wide trench ran the border of the lakebed, making it impossible to drive a car out onto it. The ground was hard-packed, a cream coloration. The mud had cracked forming geometric shapes. The diorite rose ahead, looking as if it had smashed through the surface from below, the tip of some greater form that stretched beneath. Jim could see now that the black rocks were butted up against one another in layers, rounded at the top, angling slightly. Some of them had fins, and as he drew closer, the lichen that covered them resembled barnacles. He suddenly saw densely packed whales, a whole school of them, coming out of the sea, trying to leap free, turned to stone in that moment of escape.

Jim sucked hot water from his last quart bottle. He took off his hat. It was streaked with white salt stains. He pulled the bandanna from his neck, held it above his upturned face and poured water onto it, letting the salt drops that escaped its soaking drip onto his forehead. He tied the bandanna across his face to breathe the desert air through the filter of wet bandanna. He reset the hat, gazed at the silent mountains surrounding the bowl.

It looked as if it couldn't be more than a couple of hundred yards to the diorite whales. But as he walked, they drew away, and in the heat waves that rippled their base, they appeared to drift on a liquid sea. His stomach became queasy. The bandanna dried out. He wet it again and tied it around his face again, rolled the bottom tip into a ball and stuffed it into his mouth. He moved on more slowly, sucking the moisture.

When he came to where the playa ended in a sudden incline of hard sand supporting the rocks, he half expected the mass to recede again. He walked up onto the packed sand, worked his way around to the east side of the whales and collapsed in the shade, took off his cap, spit the wadded bandanna, untied it, breathed the darker air. The rocks in the distance drifted. Using the back of the solidified

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whales for support, he took bullets from the day pack and pushed them one at a time into each bay of the cylinder of the gun. Then he looked for something living. Lizards, spiders, flies. Nothing. He stretched out, rested his face on the day pack. He closed his eyes and sank into half consciousness. He imagined whales all around, nudging him up like whales will do with their injured, pushing him toward some blue-white surface of the sea, helping him toward a re-discovered air.

Jim awoke to the deep shade of Ubehebe Peak thrown like a reprieve across the Racetrack Valley engulfing the diorite whales. He took his day pack and followed a fin-like ledge around the girth of the formation. It angled to the upraised snout of the highest whale. He climbed the last few feet to the top and scanned the horizon. There was no sign of Alex.

He drew the magnum from the holster, sighted distant peaks in the alignment of front sight and hammer block. He drew his legs up, draped his gun arm over his knee, felt its weight pull at the muscles in his arm. He felt the fine sanded wood set in the handle, his fingertip grazing the trigger. Then he set the gun on the rock before him and tried to absorb the truth of its power. Not a question of life or death. Not a commitment to giving anything up. Simply a matter of looking at the dark and deciding whether to run toward it, or to try hopelessly to crawl away from it. If he could just produce the decision to lift the gun and run toward the dark in the placement of the barrel tip against his head. If he could avoid weighing the potential promise of the remaining light, then Dr. Sinclair wouldn't matter anymore.

The desert mocked him. It said, You are making so much of your life.

He looked at the shadow of Ubehebe Peak crossing the valley to climb the Cottonwood Mountains of the Panamint Range. Night fell, and he sat atop the rock, a lookout in the crows nest of a phantom ship. He watched stars appear. The temperature box, in the light of a match, read 102. To the north, headlights appeared, silent. Later came the distant rumble of a truck engine. He lit a paraffin box from his survival kit, set it on the rock before him. He watched the headlights come on forever and forever and forever. At last they entered the Racetrack Valley, circled around toward the base of

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Ubehebe Peak and drew up to where the trail had ended. The headlights went off. A door slammed shut. He pictured Alex pulling out his binoculars, scoping the valley until the field of view fell on the rocks on which he sat. Alex would see the feeble light against the darkness, and he would come. He would come running across the playa in suspicion of something having gone wrong. Jim lay back on the rock, closed his eyes and saw Alex's radio bouncing crazily on his hip. Jim ran his fingers up his bare arms, half feeling for new manifestations of melanoma. He wanted to make sounds against it. Explosive objecting sounds of animal agony like nothing human. But the sounds would not come, and soon, he did hear Alex's running pace, his boots coming hard across the parched earth.