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Ted Conover; Courtesy Trevala Jara (Talon Vance with His Aunt and Mother)

"Please I Will Give Anything for You to Come Back"

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Why did a mother with no backcountry experience take her sister and 13-year-old son to live off the grid on a 10,000-foot mountain during a Colorado winter?

Ted Conover

Ted Conover is the author of Cheap Land Colorado: Off-Gridders at America's Edge, Rolling Nowhere, and other books.

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Talon Vance, 13, lived in an apartment complex in suburban Colorado Springs with his mom and Aunt. Other relatives lived nearby. Typically, he spent much of the week with his father, half brother, half sister, and grandparents, all of whom lived together not far away in a different town. All of that would change in August 2022: Talon's mother, Rebecca Vance, had hatched a plan to disappear from Colorado Springs and go permanently off-grid.

Talon's paternal grandmother, Marilyn Burden, still seems shell-shocked by his sudden departure. Her extended family lives in a ranch-style house on a small cul-de-sac; when I stopped by for dinner last September, there were plenty of people on the street, and lights were on in every home. Eric Burden, Talon's father, stood in his driveway speaking to a friend. He ushered me inside and introduced me to his mother, and we sat down at the dining room table.

Just over a year before, on August 1, Rebecca had dropped by out of the blue around lunchtime with Talon in tow. She handed Marilyn a photo album and other mementos of Talon, who Marilyn had helped raise and who shared a bedroom with her other grandson, Ashton, when Talon was there. Rebecca, she said, told her they were leaving town, that they "had to move to be safe." Safe from what? Marilyn asked. Rebecca wouldn't explain. And she was vague about their destination: she said that she, Talon, and her younger sister, Christine, would be driving to West Virginia, where her father lived. Marilyn didn't think Talon had ever met that grandfather. Then, to forestall the possibility that Marilyn would ask Talon about the trip, Rebecca whispered to her not to bring it up, because *he doesn't know—he thinks we're just going camping*.

Another relative was told a different story. Christine said to their stepsister, Trevala Jara, that they would be heading into the wilderness to live off the grid. Trevala, who saw Christine every week, knew that Rebecca had spent much of the pandemic glued to her computer, growing increasingly obsessed with conspiracy theories and the end of the world. She feared vaccines, technology, and the power of global elites, and thought that the only escape was to get as far away from other people as she could.

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"At first, Christine told me she wasn't going with Becky," Trevala recalled. "She thought it was crazy to do it, mainly because they didn't have the experience." But then one day, in late July 2022, Christine told Trevala that she had changed her mind, that she would accompany her sister and Talon to support them.

Trevala offered what she thought was a better solution. "I said, Don't go to the woods—go to our place in South Park. It's got an RV and a generator." Trevala and her husband, Tommy, had an off-grid property in Park County, west of Colorado Springs. But Christine said that Rebecca wouldn't budge—she wanted something more remote. Christine handed Trevala the urn containing their mother's ashes, and also asked her to help find someone to take care of her cat, Oreo. Christine even urged Trevala to take her old car but couldn't find the title for it.

Talon was by all accounts a happy boy, warm and easy to be around. "Every time he was over here, he'd pass me and say, 'I love you, Grandma,'" Marilyn said. And he was eager to please. His father, Eric, told me that no sooner would Talon do something wrong than he'd turn himself in; his conscience was almost *too* strong. Talon got on well with Eric's two eldest children, Emma and Ashton. But according to Marilyn, "He wasn't well socialized. He had friends in elementary school. But when COVID hit he was just finishing fifth grade." Rebecca pulled him out for reasons that were unclear to her family. She put him in the school district's online program for the next two years. Rebecca decided he should stay in online school even after the pandemic died down, according to the Burdens. Her resolve to keep Talon home, Eric said, extended even to questioning why online students had to pick up their new laptops in person.

In place of friends, Talon had his iPad. Rebecca forbade him from using social media, so like many kids his age Talon played games. In addition to *Super Mario Bros.*, his favorite, he enjoyed *Minecraft* and was deeply immersed in *Roblox*, the online ecosystem that approximately half of American kids under 16 have visited. Going to school digitally had shrunk his flesh-and-blood social world, and his online connections became more important. As the date of his departure approached, he started telling his *Roblox* friends, without explanation, that he would soon be leaving. Apparently, despite what his mother would whisper to Marilyn, he did know about the plan to move permanently off-grid, and he knew that it was a secret.

Christine (left) and Rebecca Vance as children (Courtesy Trevala Jara)

Rebecca pregnant with Talon (Courtesy Trevala Jara)

Nobody knows how Rebecca—the engine behind the move—and Christine chose the remote Forest Service campground outside Gunnison, about a three-and-a-half-hour drive from Colorado Springs, as the site for their escape from society. Or how, once there, they settled on a wooded area across a stream and up a hill from the campground.

Both women had long worked in manufacturing, at a company called Microchip (previously Atmel), and they lived near the factory, in an apartment complex just across Quail Lake. Their mother, Son Yup, was born in Korea but had served in the U.S. Air Force. She left the girls' biological father when they were young. She met Trevala and her brother's father in a bar on Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, Mississippi, before relocating to Fort Carson in Colorado Springs. Rebecca and Christine, just a year apart in age, were petite—both around five feet tall—with long, dark hair; according to Trevala, they had always been "joined at the hip," practically inseparable.

Rebecca had met Talon's father, Eric, at Atmel, where both made computer chips, in 2009. He was recently divorced, with custody of his young daughter and son. Rebecca was unmarried, and by all accounts still recovering from her mother's death from cancer in 2007. Their yearlong relationship resulted in a pregnancy, which Rebecca decided to carry to term without consulting him.

"Even if I inquired, 'You got any doctor appointments coming up? I'll go with you,' she always kept that stuff from me," Eric said. Instead, he heard the news that she'd given birth from another coworker. He visited Rebecca and his new son at the hospital shortly after. That's when he learned that she had named the baby Talon and had left the space for the father blank on the birth certificate. He didn't sound angry about it when I spoke to him. "She never asked me for nothing," he said, though over time he and his family became a big part of the boy's life. He remained friendly with Rebecca, but she kept his family at arm's length.

According to Trevala, "Becky has always been a recluse, always kept to herself, never really liked to be around people. Our mom and her were really close. And when she passed away, it took a huge toll on Becky. I think she became a little more of a recluse. And, you know, when you're by yourself for so many years, and don't have many friends or anything, your thoughts can get to you. When our dad passed away, in November 2019, that took a toll on her as well." Rebecca and Christine came to think of Trevala's father as their own. "Then the pandemic followed a couple of months later," she added. "I think that's what broke the camel's back."

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Rebecca left her longtime job at the factory in August 2021, in the middle of the pandemic. Acquaintances assumed that she'd found work she could do from home. The bigger change was that Rebecca got swept up by the conspiracy theories that were proliferating online.

Months after she went off-grid, a man who'd been in touch with her before she left contacted authorities. He said that he'd been texting with Rebecca, hoping to renew an old acquaintance; he'd proposed that they take a walk. She responded that she wasn't interested, that she'd soon be leaving Colorado Springs. In closing she added, "I know I probably sound like a 'conspiracy theorist,' but there are insane plots to take away our soul and humanity … if you've never heard about the Great Reset, WEF, 4th Industrial Revolution, then please look up Yuval Noah Harari, Klaus Schwab, and their agenda."

> **Rebecca, Marilyn said, told her they were leaving town, that they "had to move to be safe." Safe from what? Marilyn asked. Rebecca wouldn't explain.**

Klaus Schwab is a Swiss economist who founded the World Economic Forum in 1971. In June 2020, he proposed a series of initiatives he called the Great Reset, to reduce inequality and promote care for the environment. Conspiracy theorists took this as evidence that a global elite had planned and managed the COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdown restrictions were seen as a ruse: rather than curbing the virus's spread, their true purpose was to bring about economic collapse. The socialist world order that rose from the ashes would somehow benefit the already powerful.

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As part of her plan to exit society, Rebecca urged Talon to learn Boy Scout–style wilderness skills—knots, foraging, building shelters. A journal that he brought with him off-grid begins with loving comments about "Mommy" and "Aunty," descriptions of their "stinky" cat, Oreo, and an upbeat retrospective about attending school in person. He recalled that the teachers were very nice, referred to seven of them by name, and mentioned the time his report on a trip to the zoo had been posted on the wall for all to see. "I got an A in all my classes! Some I got more than 100% in! :D"

Next are entries about how he loves his friends on *Roblox* and loves his grandmother and brother and sister. Many pages follow about how to tie different knots:

> *Square knot!*
> *Right over left,*

Left over right 😀

Longer descriptions follow for how to tie a clove hitch, bowline, Japanese square lashing, and timber hitch. “Side note: I did the trucker’s hitch first try!!”

Just before the family left Colorado Springs, he wrote:

> *Oreo always plopped on our laps when we were on the couch. On the 29th of July, Oreo plopped between me and mommy as we were practicing ropes and knots. During online school, I would work on the couch a lot of the time. Because of that, Oreo would plop on me. On the 29th of July, Oreo plopped on me for the last time.*

This was just before Oreo was dropped off with Trevala.

Filling the lion’s share of his journal are references to his closest friends on *Roblox,* each of whom he knows only by screen name. (Talon’s screen name was Fwoofy.) He talks about how he met them, recounts direct-message exchanges they’ve had, and mentions a plan to get up at 6:30 A.M. to continue playing a game with one of them. For the next 24 pages, he records their reactions to him telling them he’d be leaving *Roblox* for good.

> *Fluffy said:*
> *August 1, 2022 5:24pm*
> *NOOO COME BACK*
>
> *August 1, 2022 5:33pm*
> *Please I will give anything for you to come back*
> *Please*
> *PLEASE*
> *I WILL BECOME THE BEST GORILLA TAG PLAYER*
> *PLEASE BE ONLINE CAN YOU DO THAT FOR ME*
> 💕💕💕💕💕💕
>
> *August 2, 2022 5:26pm*
> *hiii if you see this im crying*
> *or dead*
> *soo*
> 💕💕💕💕💕💕
> *to you*
>
> *ROBLOX IS NO FUN ANYMORE.*
> *IT ALWAYS MAKES ME LOSE MY BEST FRIENDS :((*

Finally, he records how each changed their screen name to mourn his departure:

> *Fluffy FwoofyWasTheBestFren*
> *Dragon MyFriendQuitRoblox*
> *Blake Byebestfriend*
> *Jack/Fox FoxmissesFwoofy*

Talon’s half sister, Emma, who scanned the journal for me, said it smelled like smoke, like campfires.

Rebecca (left), with Talon and Christine (Courtesy Trevala Jara)

The Gold Creek campground sits at an elevation of 10,000 feet in a valley known for heavy snow. It is an entry point to a wilderness area called Fossil Ridge that features lakes, granite peaks, and plentiful moose and mule deer, elk, and bears. The campground is open from May to September; six campsites ring a small circular drive. Visitors tend to be summer hikers and backpackers, until the weather gets cold. Then the hunters pass through—bowhunters, muzzle loaders, rifle shooters—into November. Snow usually starts to accumulate in October. Cell service is nonexistent.

In the valleys above, cabins and dug-up earth left by 19th-century prospectors are common. And just about three miles below the Gold Creek Campground is an old hard-rock mine and mill. The Gunnison County sheriff, Adam Murdie, told me that the mine continues deep into the mountain, and that his grandfather worked there.

It seems logical that the Vance party would begin their stay by camping in the designated areas like anyone else. But then they moved some 200 yards east, crossing nearby Gold Creek, which is spanned by several big logs. On the far side of the creek there are no trails, and there's fairly heavy vegetation until you climb a rise and reach a seasonal wetland with ponds. You can walk around this toward a timbered hillside with steep, treeless patches of scree. Near the bottom of this slope, the trio made their camp in a clearing surrounded by tall spruce. A trickle of a creek led to a small pond.

The dwelling they set up would later be described by investigators as an "eighty-dollar Walmart tent." Their sleeping bags were warm but not warm enough for winter. Other equipment and supplies reflected a lack of familiarity with wilderness life. They had no firearms or big knives. They had a fishing rod, and while the lakes in the wilderness area are stocked with trout, they're frozen and inaccessible in winter. To purify water they had LifeStraws, useful for hiking but not intended for long-term cold-weather camping. (Freezing temperatures can wreak havoc on personal water filters.)

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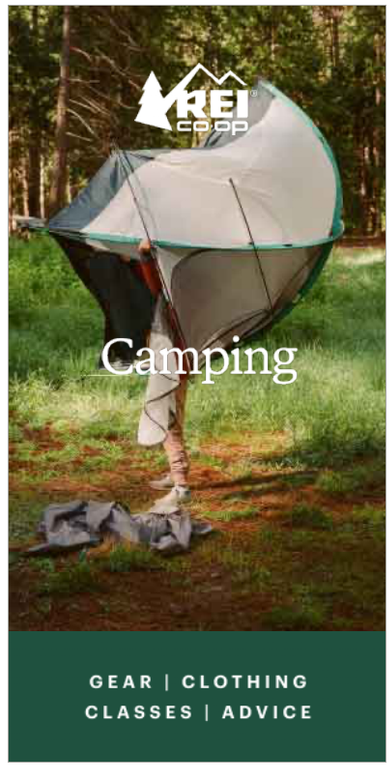

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Trevala would later show me a bundle of perhaps 50 seed packets, returned to her by officials almost a year later: kale, cilantro, carrots, peppers. Those plants are not impossible to grow in that environment, but to succeed you'd need to start early in the season, with a well-prepared bed, probably in some kind of temporary greenhouse to protect against storms and cold snaps. It appears that the trio mostly ate prepared food. Trash found at the campsite the following summer included cans and wrappers for ramen noodles, Campbell's soup, fruit juice, Vienna sausages, candy bars, and Tuna Creations.

The group built a lean-to some 30 or 40 yards from the tent, cutting logs not with a timber saw but something closer to a hacksaw. The lean-to was maybe four feet tall and had a roof made of branches; it faced a hole dug into the hillside for storage. A tarp was probably draped across the space between the two spots, offering some shelter.

It isn't known how they spent their days. Rebecca brought books about plants, as well as a Bible. There was also a set of four fantasy-themed Choose Your Own Adventure books at the campsite. Rebecca kept a journal but wrote almost exclusively about plant identification and high-altitude foraging.

Talon's journal is more revealing. The entry is a list of restaurants he both likes and misses:

> *HuHot*
> *The place with combination rice plate*
> *Mi Mexico*
> *Shin Sa Dong*
> *Chick-fil-A*
> *Village Inn*
> *Einstein Bros*
> *Buffalo Wild Wings*
> *Bonefish*

The two entries after that are about journeys Talon took into Gunnison, first with Rebecca and then with Christine. They're mainly about food, but the second one describes an emotional breakdown:

> *On the 22nd of August, me and mommy went to Gunnison and she got us a breakfast crunch wrap, two hashbrowns … and two fountain drinks! Mommy also found beany weenies, chili flavored noodles, shrimp flavor noodles, six pack apple juice for me, and two bags of Chipies for me and Aunty!*
>
> *On the 23rd of August, me and Aunty went back to Gunnison! She got more clothes, some books, some popcorn baggies, some noodles, some of which we have never tried before, fruit snacks, bag of chicken, 16 pack Cinnamon Toast Crunch bars, and Arby's! She also let me pick out a drink of my choice from the gas station since she bought ciggerates :P. I picked Grapefruit Crush.*
>
> *The Arby's we had was so tasty! Aunty got me a Greek Gyro, a large orange Cream Shake, large curly fries, and jalapeno Poppers! She also let me have some of her fountain drink! I also had a mini breakdown at Arby's because nothing feels the same anymore [sad face]. During my breakdown, she took us to Safeway and let me pick out candy of my choice! I was so sad, that nothing really sounded appealing to me anymore. So I picked out chocolate for mommy mostly, and then Aunty suggested fruit snacks for me, so I just said "OK."*
>
> *Mommy also got fruit cups because she felt like it! She also got two strawberry parfait drinks for me and Aunty! She is so sweet!*

Talon was just 13 when his mom took him off-grid in the Colorado backcountry. (Ted Conover)

Investigators later learned that sometime in the fall, possibly October, Rebecca called her father back east and asked him to wire $500 to a Gunnison supermarket. He did as she requested. This was the group's last known contact with anyone.

Around the same time, a Forest Service ranger noticed Rebecca's old Hyundai sedan parked at the Gold Creek Campground. Since nobody was camping nearby, he flagged it as possibly abandoned. In November it was towed.

A semi ghost town called Ohio City, located 6.6 miles from the Gold Creek Campground, receives an average of 155 inches of snow per year, and the winter of 2022–23 was heavier than average. Temperatures in Gunnison were falling to zero at night by the end of October; at the Gold Creek Campground, which is more than 2,000 feet higher than Gunnison, it would have been colder still. The campground is connected to Ohio City by a dirt road that's only partially plowed. By Thanksgiving, driving to or from the site would have been difficult, and likely impossible in a small sedan. There are dwellings just over a mile away that a person in need might try to break into; 3.4 miles from the campground, there's a house that appears to be occupied year-round.

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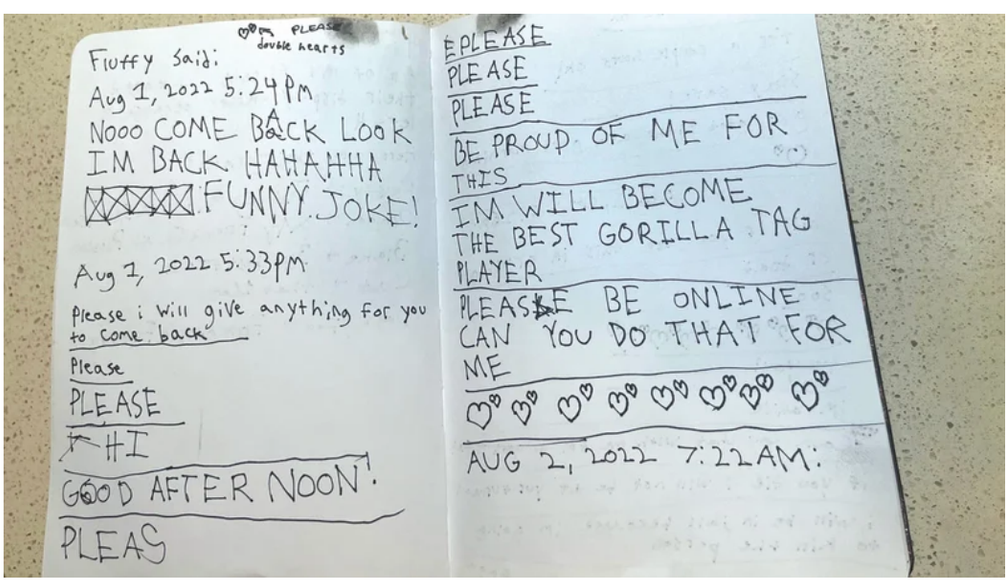

One of Talon's journals chronicles, among other things, the goodbye messages he received from friends. (Ted Conover)

Reality-TV shows such as *Alone*, *Survivor*, and *Naked and Afraid* sell survival anxiety as entertainment. Contestants sent into the wilderness palpably suffer but are never really far from help. The idea of being left to your own devices and tested evokes a bygone era of homesteading, a fundamental view of life reduced to its raw elements.

In real life, off-grid living takes diverse forms. In Alaska, it often means homesteaders building cabins and sustaining themselves for months on end by hunting and fishing. In many states, the term suggests self-sufficiency attained through farming. In Northern California, off-gridders may rely on both of those forms of sustenance, along with growing marijuana, sometimes for barter. Around Tres Piedras in northern New Mexico, it can refer to people living in carefully considered, fancifully designed (and expensive) Earthships.

Between Tres Piedras and Ohio City—in fact, only about 50 miles southeast of Ohio City as the crow flies—lies the huge expanse of the San Luis Valley, an area nearly the size of New Jersey, most of which is high-alpine prairie. Parts of the valley were subdivided in the 1970s into large numbers of low-priced, five-acre lots. Here, off-gridders can live on a shoestring, usually far from the nearest neighbor, in modified RVs, sheds, or older mobile homes. I've owned one such lot since 2019, and recently wrote a book about the unusual people who live in a kind of community around me.

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After visiting the Gold Creek Campground and Gunnison last September, I drove down to the San Luis Valley to check in with neighbors and talk to them about people who move off-grid and lose their lives. Several people who lived near me fall into this category. One, who drank a lot, either froze or suffocated when a burner on his stove went out and propane filled the room. (That's the most likely theory, anyway.) Another appeared to have fallen asleep with a lit cigarette and set his trailer on fire. More recently, an older man with health issues fell ill with what neighbors guess was COVID-19, refused to go to the hospital, and died a difficult death alone.

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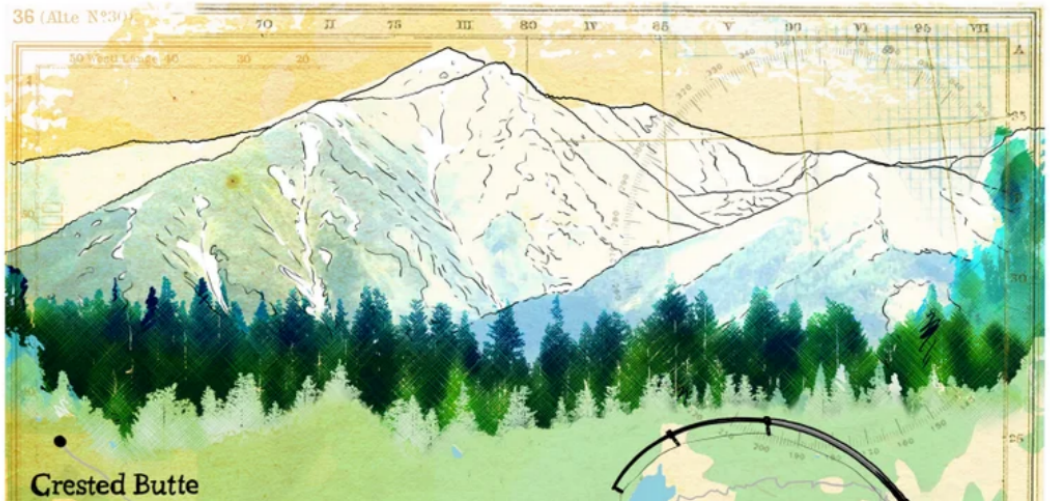
New people arrive here every summer, many with the intention of overwintering. That always raises eyebrows: temperatures plunge, winds blow hard. Few new arrivals are prepared for it, and most bail. If they run out of money, they sometimes end up at the La Puente shelter in the town of Alamosa, where I first encountered off-gridders as a volunteer for a rural outreach program designed to support people when things got rough. My mentor was Matt Little, a full-time employee who himself had lived off-grid and had exquisite radar about who was probably doing OK and who was not. Twice in one winter, he told me that he was worried about an older guy living near him in a van. Matt offered the man food and blankets, but he turned down all assistance. That didn't keep Matt from feeling guilty when the man was found frozen to death one December day, even though Matt knew it wasn't his fault.

Matt is now a restaurant cook who divides his time between a residence on the prairie, where his wife and her daughter live, and a primitive shack on the slopes of 14,351-foot Blanca Peak, where he owns about six acres that offer a commanding view of the valley floor. One day last September, when he was having car trouble, I gave him a lift from his job in town to the bottom of the steep, rocky road that leads to his shack, and we walked it together. Along the way, we talked about the Vance sisters and belief in conspiracies—because, as Matt readily admits, he's an expert. He and his wife, he said, are "both conspiracy followers and preppers."



(Illustration: Tina Zellmer)

He knew all about the constellation of threats that apparently had sent Rebecca Vance into the wilderness: the World Economic Forum, Klaus Schwab, etc. While we were together, his wife texted him memes about others. One centered on the horrific Maui fire in August 2023; there was a strong suspicion that a corrupt elite had set the blaze to dislodge Indigenous Hawaiians from valuable land. Then Matt showed me a video warning about something called 10/4. “You heard of that?” he asked. I had not.

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October 4, 2023, was the day the federal government had scheduled an extra-long test of the Emergency Alert System. Matt believed that this was ominous for several reasons: the FCC and other federal agencies were involved, and this time an emergency tone, which used to be sent only to radios and TVs, would be broadcast onto cell phones, too. “OK, so?” I asked.

Matt explained that “we’re pretty sure” the tone was designed to activate chips already present inside most of us, put there via vaccination and by eating certain brands of meat. “The tone is a special frequency that will activate the nanochips,” Matt explained, either killing people outright or turning them into zombies who will do the bidding of their masters, members of the international elite. “And do you believe that?” I asked.

“Enough that I’ll be taking the day off,” Matt replied, smiling. He and his wife planned to put their phones inside Faraday cages that day, to shield them from electromagnetic signals, and he would be armed as well. “I’ll be packin’!” he told me with a wink. Why? To protect them from zombies—or any other signs of the apocalypse. (Actually, Matt often carries a gun for self-defense anyway.)

“What if nothing happens after the test?” I asked.

“Well then I got to spend a nice day with her,” he said. I suggested that this approach—leaving open the possibility of an apocalypse without banking on it—was a major difference between him and the Vances.

“Would you ever not just take a day off, but stop working entirely, because of something bad that might happen?” I asked.

“No, I got to make a living!” Matt said, as though stating the obvious. “My first obligation is to stay alive and protect the people I love.”

Just as there are many kinds of off-gridders, so are there many shades of apocalypse predictors. Most simply keep a go bag in the closet. But an extreme few—few right now, anyway—sense immediate peril and seek sanctuary in the wilderness. So far the wilderness is proving more lethal than zombies.

The Gold Creek Campground, where the Vances pitched their tent, sits at 10,000 feet elevation.

The Gold Creek Campground, where the Vances pitched their tent, sits at 10,000 feet elevation. (Ted Conover)

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Marilyn Burden, Talon’s grandmother, kept hoping, and even expecting, that one day Talon and his mother would appear at her door having returned from West Virginia. She had tried calling Rebecca’s cell phone numerous times, until December 15, 2022, when a message said that it was no longer working. Finally, almost a year after mother, son, and sister had left, came news of their whereabouts. Marilyn remembers the date, July 24.

A person hiking off-trail near the Gold Creek Campground had come upon “an older squatter’s camp and had observed a mummy laying in the camp,” according to the Gunnison County Sheriff’s Office.

Because the report had arrived late in the day, the sheriff’s office responded the next morning. Investigator Skye Wells was part of a small team, also including county coroner Michael Barnes, that used GPS coordinates provided by the hiker to locate the camp. It was, Wells recalls, a pretty setting but an ugly scene.

Under a grove of stately spruce trees, Wells remembers, there was a lot of trash and an abundance of dried feces: diarrhea. The whole area smelled bad. The mummy was as advertised, less of a corpse than a husk. The skin was dark and leathery from exposure to the arid mountain air, and it was missing part of one arm, where the bones were visible. They couldn’t tell the sex. Oddly, it was located some 13 feet from the tent, which was blue and had zipped-up doors on either side.

The team next looked at the lean-to. Wells surmised that a tarp he saw on the ground had served as a roof, and that it had come down from the weight of snow. Finally, they looked at the tent.

“I open it up,” Wells recalled, “and immediately see the second… victim, I’m gonna say. You could see that person lying there. And it looked like there was just a pile of blankets next to them.” Wells thought they should open up the back side, to “see if we can get some of this out of the way without disturbing the body.” That’s when he discovered that “we got another body inside, and it was fully enclosed in a sleeping bag, kind of curled up.”

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Next they tried to understand: why was there one body outside and two inside? The conclusion they came to after discussing it was that “the person that was outside died first. It was the middle of winter. They didn’t want to sleep next to a dead person. So they put them outside until they could do something about it.” Then they died, too.

The sheriff's office had alerted the Forest Service, since it administers the land. A ranger who responded remembered the towed Hyundai. Investigators checked with the towing company, only to learn that, in accordance with state law, the vehicle had been either auctioned off or sent to salvage after 30 days and could no longer be found. Among the few clues they did find in the tent: Christine Vance's driver's license and the journals kept by Rebecca and Talon.

Suspecting now that the bodies inside the tent belonged to the sisters, and the body outside to the son, the coroner and investigators made contact with members of the extended Vance family. They also tried to locate the dead boy's father, but the Vances didn't know his last name. A terse initial press release announced that three "heavily decomposed bodies" had been discovered at a remote campsite. Almost two weeks later, the coroner followed up with Rebecca and Christine's names, which offered clues to a larger world, and led to a rush of publicity.

A journal Talon brought off-grid

A journal Talon brought off-grid (Ted Conover)

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Eric Burden, Talon's dad, first heard the news from a friend at work who knew about his relationship with Rebecca and had read about her death in the *Colorado Springs Gazette*. Eric told his mom and kids. Eventually, he got in touch with the authorities in Gunnison and learned a little more. Trevala became the family's point person for media inquiries. The Burdens were invited to a small memorial service, where each of them spoke, mostly about Talon.

But Talon's name was never printed in any news stories, and his face was blurred out in photos that were published or broadcast—standard procedure when a minor is involved, Eric was told. But to him it seemed less like Talon's identity was being protected than it was being erased. When I finally figured out how to get in touch with Eric—roughly two months after the bodies were discovered—the world still didn't know his son's name.

The story got coverage all over the place, partly because it suggested tabloid qualities of horror and depravity. But I felt like the interest went deeper than that, because the story gave rise to a series of troubling questions. Above all, how could this happen? What danger was so urgent that two middle-aged women would relocate from a safe apartment to an obscure campsite at 10,000 feet, taking along a 13-year-old boy? Why had they chosen this location? How could they believe that they'd survive the winter? And, particularly vexing, why hadn't one of them walked the few miles down the road for help once it was clear that they were freezing and starving?

No evidence of impending doom would have been stronger, it seemed to me, than the death of Talon. The shock and sadness of it to an apparently devoted mother like Rebecca is difficult to comprehend. But still: faced with that, why didn't she and Christine at least try to save themselves?

> **"A person hiking off-trail near the Gold Creek Campground had come upon "an older squatter's camp and had observed a mummy laying in the camp."**

A second wave of headlines was generated by the autopsy report, released seven weeks after the corpses were discovered, and including the revelation that the body found outside—Talon's—had weighed only 40 pounds. It was clear, investigator Wells told me, that the group suffered grievously. His best guess was that the diarrhea around the campsite was caused by giardia in the water they drank, a result of inadequate filtration or boiling. Though he'd found an unopened package of ramen noodles, based on the condition of the bodies, he believed that the group had essentially starved to death. As to why nobody went for help once the situation became truly dire, his theory was that it was too late. Starvation leads to confusion, dizziness, and exhaustion. They were too weak, too disoriented or delusional, too far gone.

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Two things Trevala told me suggested a further explanation. Rebecca's refusal to consider Trevala and Tommy's off-grid place suggests that she didn't want to be findable—by family or, perhaps, by child welfare. Not only that, but it seems clear that she and Christine didn't intend to return. When Christine brought over the urn containing their mother's ashes, she hadn't said, *Keep this until we get back*. Rather she'd said, *Keep this*. Their departure seemingly involved a promise between Rebecca and Christine: *No turning back*. It reminded me of a detail from Jon Krakauer's book *Into the Wild*. On his journey to Alaska, Christopher McCandless spent time with a retiree named Ron Franz, played in the movie by Hal Holbrook. Franz taught him some leatherworking skills, and McCandless inscribed a "No U-Turn" sign into a belt he'd tooled. That strikes me as meaningful: McCandless had a destination—the Alaska wilderness—and decided it was a one-way trip.

I discussed all this with the Gunnison coroner, Michael Barnes, at his small office, which doubled as a funeral parlor. A coroner's job, he explained, is to determine the cause of death. And the question of Talon's death had come up after the pathologist finished the autopsies and was writing his report. The two women died of exposure and starvation—that was clear. But so had Talon, who was in their care. Should his death be considered the result of neglect, and therefore deemed a homicide?

Barnes said that he told the pathologist about reading Talon's diary, about his love for his mother and her evident love for him. In every respect but the decision to go off-grid, he said, she had appeared to be a good parent. So they ruled his death an accident.

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But does a history of loving care absolve a parent of blame for putting their child in a place of extreme risk? Is it relevant that Rebecca's judgment seemed impaired by her belief in conspiracies, which seems very close to mental illness? I was struck by how investigator Wells, when we spoke, wasn't quite sure what to call the dead people he found at the campsite. He settled on "victims." But were they? Talon certainly was.

The remains of the Vances' lean-to

The remains of the Vances' lean-to (Ted Conover)

Crosses that family members placed near the campsite

Crosses that family members placed near the campsite (Ted Conover)

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At Marilyn Burden's house in Colorado Springs, there is a small shrine to Talon. It features photos of the boy from the time he was an infant to just before he left for the Gold Creek Campground; vinyl figures of Mario—the video game character he adored—and a fluffy blue stuffed raccoon he'd taken with him into the wilderness, which was returned by the sheriff's office. The family remembers him in other ways, too: his half sister, Emma, made several bracelets that spell out his name (Marilyn was wearing hers when I visited—she wears it all the time). His half brother, Ashton, whose bedroom Talon once shared, has a photo of Talon taped to the back of his phone.

Trevala is often reduced to tears when she remembers her sisters and nephew and contemplates their horrible deaths. She's willing to talk about everything, she says, because it helps her process the loss, and also "so that nobody else thinks it's OK to go into the wilderness without thoroughly preparing."

But of course no reasonable person thinks that. The deaths of Rebecca, Christine, and Talon were the product of delusion, paranoia, and falsehoods relentlessly promoted online—and perhaps also of misconceptions created by reality shows where everyone emerges from the wilderness exhausted but still happy and alive. Those ideas and images reached a person who was vulnerable and isolated, and who turned them into her personal apocalypse.

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Lead Photos: Ted Conover; Courtesy Trevala Jara (Talon Vance with His Aunt and Mother)

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