Kristen Iversen grew up in the shadow of Rocky Flats, a top-secret nuclear facility. Then she went to work there. What was really going on within those walls?

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TABLET BONUS
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The author near the site where the plant once stood. More than 1,000 acres can never be reopened for human use.
Each morning over coffee, I scour the want ads. It’s 1994; I’m a single mother and graduate student who needs a job with flexible hours. And then, there it is, a large ad: administrative skills, flexible hours, $12.92 an hour. The Rocky Flats Environmental Technology Site is hiring. Start immediately, it says. Environmental Technology Site? It used to be known as the Rocky Flats nuclear weapons facility. When I was growing up nearby, my family and most of our neighbors thought Rocky Flats made household-cleaning supplies. In fact, Rocky Flats secretly produced plutonium triggers or “pits” for nuclear bombs—some 70,000 plutonium triggers over the course of more than 30 years (see timeline). By the late 1970s, as the truth began to spread, people protested at the bomb plant and worried about radioactive and toxic waste in surrounding neighborhoods. Plutonium-trigger production ended in 1989 after the FBI and EPA raided the plant, leading to a grand jury investigation (which was eventually thwarted). Still, the site remained open, and a new company, EG&G, took over.

But in ’94 I don’t know all this. I’ve spent the late ’80s living in Germany with my former husband; after we moved back, I had more pressing concerns as the mother of two young boys in a marriage that was ending. Now, reading the ad, I think they must have cleaned things up out there. If there is contamination, I reason, I’ve already been exposed to it. A little more won’t hurt, will it? And many of the kids I grew up with ended up working at Rocky Flats. It must be OK.

On the morning of September 14, I drop Sean and Nathan off at day care and drive out to the plant for my first day of work. More than 800 buildings, trailers, and tents at Rocky Flats are hidden from the road. Only the entrance gate is visible. Just as I get to my assigned desk, a voice sputters over the loudspeaker: “Attention. The plant is currently experiencing winds of 55 miles per hour or more. Those in tents should secure the area and move into permanent buildings. Those in permanent buildings should remain inside and not leave the building. Thank you for your attention. Have a nice day.”

TWO TOP MANAGERS WEAR buttons reading “It’s the plutonium, stupid.”
“You don’t know about the FBI raid?”
“No.”
“Shh!” she says. “We’re not supposed to talk.”
A manager brings me a sheaf of documents.
“You don’t need to worry about trying to understand any of this,” he says. “Just type it.”

Despite all the secrecy, the new secretary of energy, Hazel O’Leary, has brought an air of openness to the
plant. The two top managers from EG&G and the Department of Energy (DOE) walk around our building with buttons pinned to their lapels: “It’s the plutonium, stupid,” a play on President Clinton’s campaign slogan “It’s the Economy, Stupid.” The plant says it’s focused on cleanup. Even so, the truth about what’s stored here—as well as the leaks, fires, accidents, and contamination problems—is classified, and most people know little about it. The production of plutonium triggers has ceased, but the plant still works with toxic and radioactive materials and waste. Plutonium is transported off-site by trains, high-security trucks, and sometimes by noncommercial and commercial planes out of Denver. No one talks about it. I type memos and letters, and before long I’m tasked to type weekly “Hot List” reports of “incidents” or problems, milestones, and events for the DOE in Washington. Everything is expressed in acronyms and euphemisms. An IHSS is an “Individual Hazardous Substance Site.” MUF is “Material Unaccounted For,” that is, missing plutonium. There’s a lot of missing plutonium. I write about spills and leaks and problem solar ponds, the 881 Hillside and its secret long-buried waste, and the West Spray Fields, where contaminated waste was sprayed out onto open fields and eventually finds its way into local water supplies.

I don’t know what all the acronyms mean, and frankly, I’m not sure I want to. The Kafkaesque language has an anesthetizing sameness to it that’s both frightening and comforting. And I’m a little ashamed to admit to myself that perhaps I don’t particularly care. It’s a good paycheck, with decent hours, and I need the money.

There’s a sense of bravado among the employees, and I feel that too. I spend my days working near tons of plutonium. It hasn’t killed me yet, I joke with the other secretaries. They feel the same way. Yet part of me is petrified of the place and always has been. Still, I want to see. I want to understand. I aspire to be a writer, so I do what I always do: I take notes. At first it’s on envelopes and napkins and Post-its that I cram in my purse at the end of the day. Then I buy a small notebook and start keeping a daily journal. I am the post–Cold War Harriet the Spy, reporting from the front lines. Except that the Cold War isn’t really over. Here, just three miles from my childhood home, it’s alive and well.

Debra*, one of my immediate supervisors, is full of advice. “If you ever have to go into one of the hot

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“How does the plutonium know to stay on that side of the line?” I ask.
A ROCKY FLATS TIMELINE

- **1952** The plant opens, only 16 miles from Denver and eight from Boulder.
- **1957** A major fire spreads radioactive contamination—but residents aren’t told about the extent of it until 1970.
- **1969** A second fire is the costliest industrial accident in the U.S. at that time.
- **1970** After independent scientists find plutonium off-site, the Atomic Energy Commission admits to the contamination.
- **1975** Rockwell International replaces Dow Chemical as managing contractor.
- **1978** Large-scale public protests begin, and continue for years.
- **1989** Based on reports of extensive contamination, the FBI raids Rocky Flats. Production of plutonium triggers ends. A federal grand jury is impaneled, and a lengthy investigation begins.
- **1990** EG&G assumes management of Rocky Flats. A class-action lawsuit is filed on behalf of nearly 13,000 residents alleging that Dow and Rockwell allowed plutonium to contaminate their land.
- **1992** Despite the requests of grand jurors for indictments, the government prosecutors negotiate a settlement. Rockwell pleads guilty to ten violations of the Clean Water Act and federal hazardous waste laws and pays a fine of $18.5 million. Outraged grand jurors write their own report detailing ongoing contamination. The report is permanently sealed.
- **1995** In the ongoing class-action suit *Cook v. Rockwell Int’l*, a U.S. district judge holds the DOE in contempt of court for failure to release millions of pages of documentation regarding missing plutonium, health issues, and more. [Heavily redacted documents are eventually produced.]
- **2000** Legislation is passed to help compensate ill workers exposed to radiation but missing records make it hard to prove.
- **2001** Kaiser-Hill LLC agrees to partially clean up Rocky Flats for an estimated $7.3 billion. The DOE initially estimated a total cleanup at $37 billion.
- **2005** Kaiser-Hill says cleanup is complete.
- **2006** The jury in *Cook v. Rockwell Int’l* awards the plaintiffs almost $554 million.
- **2007** Over 4,900 acres (or 80 percent) of the Rocky Flats site are transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.
- **2008** The judge in *Cook v. Rockwell Int’l* issues a final award of $926 million. Dow denies any wrongdoing and appeals.
- **2010** The Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals in Denver overturns the decision and throws out the award.
- **2012** The wildlife refuge is still closed to the public. Extensive home construction continues in the area.
[radioactive] areas,” she advises, “take off your bra before you go. Those guys set the checkpoint so high that a bra with an underwire will set it off, and they like to make you take it off. They’re real bored down there. Watch out for the guards.” I intend to ask her if she follows her own advice, but she doesn’t give me the chance.

“And watch out for the activists at the east gate when you come in. They’re always there. Boulder crazies. They’ll wave a sign at anything. It’s nothing but kids, hippies, and housewives.”

“Is it true what they’re saying about contamination?” I ask.

Anger crosses her face. “You’d have to ask a scientist. I don’t know. Some of these guys really know what’s going on, but they don’t talk.”

I nod. One thing I do understand is silence.

“I’ve worked here for a long time,” she says. “Sure, there’s pollution all over the place. But I know someone who’s worked in the hot zone for 30 years. And there’s nothing wrong with him. Not a thing.”

Three weeks later, on October 8, there is a serious “incident” involving the unauthorized draining of a process line containing plutonium-bearing nitric acid. Six days pass before the accident is reported to senior management. Plutonium operations come to an immediate halt. Three employees are terminated.

I wouldn’t have paid much attention if one of the managers, Mr. K, hadn’t offered to take me to lunch. “I’ll drive you to Boulder,” he says. “I know a nice French place.” On the way out, we pass stacks of empty wooden containers in rows behind the parking lot. “Those are from the pondcrete containers. Do you know about pondcrete?”

I shake my head.

We drive without comment to the restaurant and order before Mr. K begins to talk. I’m a little suspicious of his motives—the office is always buzzing with rumors of who might be having an affair. But Mr. K has no such motive. He wants to talk about his job.

“I don’t belong there,” he says. “But what can I do? The salary and the benefits are too good to just quit.”

I nod.

“You can’t trust anyone, you know,” he says. “No one’s really accountable for anything. Everything is done by committee.”

I’ve heard this said before. We have sparkling water with lemon and rosemary chicken. Over chocolate Napoleons, Mr. K explains the pondcrete, a
desperate attempt to deal with overflowing radioactive waste. Plutonium was mixed with cement and the toxic pudding poured into plastic-lined cardboard boxes the size of small refrigerators—12,000 blocks that stood out in the open. In at least 8,000, the jelly never hardened and radioactive waste leaked into the ground and local water supplies. He goes on to describe the solar ponds. The 903 Pad. The spray irrigation. The leaking plutonium-processing line. “The plant is a mess,” he says. “When the raid happened, everything just stopped, and plutonium was stuck on the production line. Plutonium is stored in various stages all over the plant. It's nothing but a big shell game.”

We get back to the office just as the overhead lights start flickering. A voice comes over the PA system. “If the lights go out, do not be nervous,” it says. “I repeat. Do not be nervous. Technicians are working.”

“It’s the commies,” Mr. K says, winking.

The PA comes on again. “Thank you for your attention. Have a nice day.”

On her lunch break, if the weather is nice, Debra walks briskly around the plant for exercise, all the way down the hill, past the “hot” buildings with their chain-link fences and razor wire, and up the other side. “Join me,” she says.

On sunny autumn days, it’s a breathtaking view. On one side lie the mountains; on the other, a landscape dotted with houses that stretch all the way to Denver. “The air is so clean here,” Debra says. “It comes down right off the mountains.” We walk past a large flat graved area cordoned off with what looks like yellow police tape. A few oil barrels stand upright, and parts of the area are under a tent.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Oh, that,” Debra says. “That’s the 903 Pad.” She walks quickly, arms moving up and down to keep her heart rate up. Thousands of barrels are gone, although the contamination remains, and parts of the area are covered with gravel and asphalt.

“Why is it roped off?”

“There’s some plutonium that leaked out there.”

I reach out and touch the yellow ribbon. I’m struck by the memory of my sister and me, riding our horses around the perimeter of the plant, kicking the No Trespassing signs with the toes of our cowboy boots.

“What’s the difference between one side of the ribbon and the other?”

“Oh, we don’t have to worry about that,” Debra assured me. “They say this side is safe.”

“How does the plutonium know to stay on that side of the line?”

“It knows. Plutonium doesn’t travel.”

When I return to my desk, another secretary, Anne, asks whether I’ve been out walking, and I say yes. A little bit of sunshine at lunch helps keep up my energy, which has been lagging lately.

A week earlier, I’d seen a doctor. “I
don’t know what’s wrong with me,” I said. “I don’t feel right. I’m always tired, and it’s been going on for a while.”

They take some blood tests. I’m waiting for the results.

“Did you see any of those Preble mice?” Anne asks. This is a running joke in the company. Recently, the EPA started a petition to protect the tiny Preble’s meadow jumping mouse, possibly the rarest small mammal in North America, which apparently likes to live in the Rocky Flats buffer zone.

“I guess they’re too small to see,” I joke.

Anne’s not joking. She leans forward. “Here’s the thing,” she whispers. “They’re more concerned about protecting some damned rodent than they are about protecting people.”

At the end of a long December day, I pick up Sean and Nathan, feed them dinner, give them baths, tuck them in. Then I stretch out on the couch and turn on the television. I’ll give myself a few minutes before I go to bed.

Suddenly, I sit bolt upright. Rocky Flats is on television.

ABC’s Nightline is interviewing people I know. The narrator, Dave Marash, talks about years of contamination and how production was halted after the 1989 FBI raid. Since then, Rocky Flats has been in a state of limbo, wanting to resume building nuclear weapons while trying to deal with environmental regulations. Rocky Flats has five of the nation’s ten most dangerous buildings, Marash says.

Marash reports that an internal memo shows that as much as 1,320 pounds of plutonium may be stockpiled around the plant, including more than 5,000 sealed containers of waste, many containing a buildup of hydrogen gas that can cause a container to rupture and scatter plutonium. Cans that were not supposed to be stored for more than a year have been stored for five. Mark Silverman, the DOE manager at Rocky Flats, appears on-screen. I know his voice well from the PA system at work. “We know, for example, it’s in the vents. It’s in the ductwork. We know it’s in the glove boxes, in the lathes. We know it’s in the walls and ceilings. We just can’t tell you exactly how much is at any given location in a lot of places.”

Have a nice day, I think. I grab my journal and start scribbling their words.

“This may look,” Marash says, “like an anonymous stretch of asphalt.” My heart jumps. That’s the 903 Pad that I walk by on my lunch hour. “From here,” he continues, “contaminated groundwater leaked down the ridge toward the plain and the northern and western suburbs of Denver. Some of the barrels rusted and started leaking, ... and the migration of toxic waste can be traced on a map of drainage patterns in the Rocky Flats area. Walnut Creek drains down and dumps into Great Western reservoir, and then Woman Creek comes down and feeds the Standley Lake reservoir.
Samples from the bottoms of both reservoirs show deposits of plutonium. The plutonium traveled through the water and through the air.” Gale Biggs, PhD, appears on-screen, noting that his studies suggest that “the plutonium levels do not drop off as you go farther away from the plant.”

Marash then talks about the grand jury investigation that began in 1989 after the FBI raid. He interviews Ryan Ross, the journalist who broke the story of the runaway grand jury to the press. “The jurors thought that anybody who’d committed a crime should be held accountable for it,” Ross says. “They didn’t care whether they worked in the federal government or in the private sector or how high up in the government they were.” He notes that a dozen sections were taken out of the jury report. “Almost all of them had to do with the conclusions of the jury that the illegal conduct they found that Rockwell was engaged in was continuing to be done under the successor contractor [EG&G].” One of the grand jurors appears on-screen. “I had nightmares, you know. I couldn’t sleep at night, thinking about what I had heard for a whole week in that jury room.”

I pace the dark living room for an hour before putting on my nightgown. So many of the things I feared, or were afraid to even think about, are true. It’s real, and it’s still going on.

Iversen continued to work at the plant until January 1995; she later devoted a decade to researching Rocky Flats. She and her siblings have ongoing unexplained health issues, and her sister has had several bouts of cancer. Nearly every family they grew up with has been affected by cancer; Iversen believes some of those illnesses and deaths can be linked to Rocky Flats.

EG&G, unlike Dow and Rockwell, was never sued for any wrongdoing. A controversial cleanup of the site was declared complete in 2005. More than one thousand acres are so contaminated that they can never be open for human use. The rest of the site is slated to open as a wildlife refuge and public recreation area.