

Shelley Jackson

SIMON SAYS,

Draw a picture showing a tent city in the mist. Blend black and white for the mist. Add a suggestion of gold as two figures run out of the mist, a boy in a blue cap and overalls and a robot in a floral skirt, eyes gleaming. The boy is short, dark-haired, not smiling. He is clinging to the robot's skirt. The robot is made of steel and leather, covered in dust. It is a Series 800, a vintage steam model, as is shown by the mist issuing from its buttonholes. Simon says, make these details sharp and clear, in contrast to the fumes and indecision of the camp.

Following them, a cyclone of tribal robots in executive orange.

"Simon," says the robot, "I think I will pick you up and run."

Simon says, imitate a robot.

Now a line climbs the page: It is the highway, rising through olive farms into the high desert. Robots at work in the fields raise their heads, rotate them to scrutinize the two fugitives moving fast up the road. The company in orange follows, more slowly. At the edge of the reservation, marked by a roadblock of tires and debris, it turns back.

Simon says, draw a new picture. It must define an elementary landscape, dusty, salt-white, debris-strewn. The figures moving slowly into it are minute by comparison, almost disappearing altogether when they turn off the highway onto a small road leading through dry bushes and a handful of houses in ruins toward the edge of the continent.

The trail descends into a harbor. At the edge of the water, represented by a blue line, the robot stops. The boy stands, kicking a tire, as the S800 sucks up seawater. "Mom," Simon says. "Mom. Are you a bandit?"

The robot raises its head, spewing potable water into a cup from its desalination port. It hands Simon the cup. Clinging to the cup, Simon smiles at the robot. "Mom, are you? Because I'm a bandit."

"Then I'm a bandit," says the robot, taking the boy's arm. They pick their way through the ruins of the harbor city to a road that leads along the coast for a league or so before turning back into the desert.

Simon says, draw the dry hills near the reservation where a small company of contract killers water their robots at a small well. The chief headhunter kicks his