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All Along the Pacific

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All Along the Pacific

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in
Creative Writing
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts

By

Corina Bittleston Calsing

BA, English, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo

May 2009

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to all men in my family who are members of E Clampus Vitus. They instilled in me a love for the historical, the hysterical, and the bizarre.

Acknowledgements

First, thank you to Joanna Brent Leake, for patiently helping me with revisions and offering so much great criticism.

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The Head in the Jar

1853

Joaquin Murieta paused on the hill; he watched sweat drip down the neck of his horse, matting its fur. The early-morning fog that had crept over the coastal range had long since burned off. At this time of year, the sun had already baked the grasses covering the hills and valley brown. A hot breeze blew off the oak-covered hills rimming the inland side of the Salinas River Valley, and high above, a venue of turkey vultures circled in the currents. Joaquin looked down, then, into the valley. At the intersection of the Monterey/ San Juan Bautista and Los Angeles/ San Francisco stage lines, stood Howe's Inn and its small dry-goods store. Rosa had wanted violet pastilles, and violet pastilles she would have. Joaquin hoped they would have them at the general store attached to the way station.

Even with his full beard, alias, and the rumor that he was deceased, paranoia still haunted Joaquin. He felt he needed to be always on the lookout for traitors, Rangers, and bounty hunters, even though they had all lost interest years before. Still, he wanted nothing more than to turn tail and return to Mexico, to Trincheras and his mother's hacienda and the bulls. California held no allure for him now, and were it not for impending birth of his second child and his wife's demand to be with her family, in Mexico he would be. As soon as the baby grew strong enough to travel, to Mexico they would go.

As Joaquin watched, a stage pulled away from Howe's, traveling north toward San Francisco. The city lay not far off. In fact, Joaquin had thought about heading up there with Ignacio to see the sights and to get the young boy out of his mother's hair in her last days of pregnancy. In the end, though, Joaquin didn't want to risk being recognized, and there was a much greater chance of that happening in San Francisco than at his in-laws' secluded ranch.

Joaquin clicked to his horse, and it began to descend the small hill toward Howe's. When they arrived, Joaquin tied his mount to the hitching post and went inside the store.

Howe stood behind the counter, an apron protecting the precious custom clothing he took trips to San Francisco to buy. Joaquin scoffed at such luxuries. He looked around. Well organized, the shop nevertheless smacked of Howe's own extravagance. He stocked the shelves with fabrics no rancher's wife from the Salinas Valley would be caught dead in. Joaquin's mother in Trincheras would wear it though; she felt herself aristocracy. The women around here only wanted practical calicos and plain muslins, stuff they could wash again and again in their homemade lye soap.

"Welcome, friend," Howe said. He stuck his thumbs behind the front of his apron and puffed out his chest. "You are the Felizes' guest from the south, yes?"

"Joaquin Carrillo." Howe had stood in front of his inn when the stage had arrived with Joaquin and his family a few days before, but they had not exchanged pleasantries. The surname felt right enough, that of his mother's second husband. He'd used it plenty of times when the name Murieta would not be welcome.

"And what can I get for you this fine afternoon?" Howe asked. He swept an arm around the expanse of his holdings. "I have plenty, *plenty* to interest anyone." Howe leveled his gaze on Joaquin, making him feel unsettled. Howe's eyebrow went up. "Would you like to see my collections of revolvers?"

Joaquin suppressed his shudder. He'd not touched a revolver in...years. He'd sworn never to take one up again. "No, no guns. I come only for candy. For my wife." Joaquin approached the counter and pointed to the tin of violet pastilles that sat there. He admired the purple flowers printed on the tin.

Howe laughed. "All this way for a tin of candies for the little lady? That speaks of deep devotion, *señor*." Howe handed him the tin and took the money in return.

Joaquin stowed the pastilles in his jacket pocket. "Thank you," he said as he turned from the counter.

"*De nada*," Howe replied.

Hearing Spanish come from the other man's lips caused Joaquin's stomach to churn. Joaquin suspected he did it not out of any sense of camaraderie, but instead out of some feeling of superiority.

Joaquin left the store and returned to his horse.

As Joaquin mounted, he looked down the valley, and something caught his eye. He doubted the reliability of his own sight momentarily, but as the vision moved steadily toward him, he could no longer deny what he saw. A traveling fair, with rides and performers and sideshows. The menagerie -- a few camels, some large white draft, and one emaciated Indian elephant -- brought the tents in on their backs, traveling across the California countryside.

When Joaquin and his family had arrived on the stagecoach, Ignacio had seen the announcement for the fair and, most important for Ignacio, for the sideshow's main attraction, a two-headed calf.

An advertisement for the carnival hung from one of Howe's porch supports now, and Joaquin looked at it again. The calf did not interest him much, but the attraction boasted of on the bottom left hand corner...

WILL BE EXHIBITED FOR ONE DAY ONLY

THE HEAD OF THE RENOWNED BANDIT

JOAQUIN!

AND THE HAND
OF THREE FINGERED JACK

This fair, then, had it. *Possessed* it. Right now, mounted in some case on one of those swaying beasts of burden, came Joaquin's head. Only it wasn't his head, really. He'd heard of it. Knew that after he'd abandoned *Los Cinco Joaquines* and fled to Mexico with Rosa, a California Ranger, Harry Love, had tracked down the rest of his band and killed many of them. He'd mistaken one -- which one Joaquin did not know -- for Joaquin Murieta and took the man's head. It had traveled up and down California for years, and now it was here, oddly, coincidentally, when Joaquin himself had returned.

He watched the group approach. He would have to see it. It would help to calm Rosa, too. When she saw the head, she could finally put that part of her life to rest, she said. She could make peace with her own ghosts, she told him: her dead brothers, the other Joaquines, and Jack.

Joaquin mounted and road back toward the ranch, humming the *corrido* that told of his last heroic stand to himself as he traveled.

Beneath a grand, lobe-leafed valley oak, a few enterprising, local ranchers hawked sweet, cool *liquados* and grilled beef on slices of bread baked in domed adobe ovens. Neighbors sold mostly to neighbors, the mix of Mexican and American currency going back and forth between the same small group. The language, too, was mixed, a smattering of Spanish here, a phrase of English there, all in tones that suggested self-satisfied hard work and a well-formed camaraderie. Joaquin felt almost comfortable among them as he ate his *torta* and walked. He could have felt truly comfortable if it wasn't for the sheer number of people that had turned out for the fair. Joaquin tried to feel confident that everyone there believed the head of Joaquin Murieta sat pickling in a

sideshow tent. But what if someone had even the smallest doubt? What if someone thought it odd that Joaquin had ridden with the Felizes, and wasn't there a Feliz ranch just the other side of that ridge? Surely, it couldn't be the same family. Common enough name after all, but what if...?

“¡*Vamos, Papa!*” Ignacio cried as he tried to pull ahead on Joaquin's empty hand, out of the shade of the oak tree and into the fair proper.

Joaquin glanced at his young son. “*Ingles, mijo,*” Joaquin chastised mildly, gripping the boy's hand tighter. “*Estamos en California.*”

“*Lo siento.*” The boy sighed. “Come on, Papa! I want to see the cow!” He'd already wolfed down his own sandwich.

Joaquin could deny the boy nothing. He had been so good during the long journey from Trincheras to Los Angeles, then the stage ride here, and his patience with the smothering, indulgent grandparents beyond reproach. Plus, going to see the cow had given Joaquin all the excuse he needed to enter the sideshow.

“*Ay dios mio,*” Rosa said from a few steps behind.

Joaquin turned to look at her. She wrapped her thin hands around her swollen belly; she'd covered it with a rose-embroidered cotton shift. Joaquin shook his head. Across her breasts, Rosa had managed to close a few buttons of her European-style riding coat, but she could not force it across the expanse of her belly. She should have stayed at her parents' ranch, rather than making the walk to Howe's. Joaquin could have told her what he saw, but she had insisted.

“Slow down, my boys.” Rosa stopped.

The birth was not far off now, mere days if not hours from the look of her. Joaquin wondered if Ignacio would have a little *hermano* or *hermana* to take care of.

“Do you think that cow always has hunger because he has two mouths?” Ignacio asked his father.

Joaquin shrugged and smiled. His son’s English was sometimes awkward. Joaquin dug in his heels and pulled Ignacio to a halt, waiting for his wife to catch her breath.

Joaquin didn’t mind stalling, standing there in the field, the late-summer wild grain ripening on the stalks around them. Joaquin sniffed the air and looked at the sky. Fall would come on soon, and with it, light frost in the morning. It would never get much colder than that, but still, he did not like it. He remembered his few years mining in the Sierra Nevada, when the snow fell, and his small wood stove proved inadequate at keeping the ice outside his cabin. Rosa had warmed his bed too, then, but even her heat didn’t reach the cold in his soul. Gold, a great corrupting force. Greed had driven him to the mountains in the late 1840’s, and other men’s greed had driven him quickly out; the *americanos* stripped him, a Mexican, of the rights to his claim. That single act led to those few bloody, rebellious years after. Years he wished now he could forget. And then Rosa told him she was with child. Happily, he took his wife back to Mexico with him. They settled on his family’s hacienda, picking up with the breeding of the bulls where his father and stepfather had left off.

“Papa!”

Ignacio tugged on his hand, but Joaquin held his ground, waiting for Rosa.

Even in Sonora, the citizens had heard of *Los Cinco Joaquines* and the brave, last stand of Joaquin Murieta. Joaquin’s mother, believing the stories in the fast-traveling ballads, the *corridos*, true, had covered all the mirrors in the house and hung black crepe over the charcoal sketch of him in the parlor. When Joaquin, lean from the thousand or so miles of hiding and fleeing from Harry Love, rode through the grand gate of the estate, pregnant wife in tow, his

mother collapsed from fright, crushing beneath her corn-fed weight one of the estate's many Chihuahuas. A servant girl had to run to town to bring the doctor, one man both veterinarian and surgeon.

“Ay, Joaquin,” Rosa said, landing a soft touch on his shoulder. “Let’s go before the child bursts.”

Joaquin looked down at his son, who still grasped his hand eagerly and stepped from one foot to the other in impatience. They traversed the last expanse of amber turf to the small fair and entered through the makeshift palisade.

Howe himself, resplendent in a scarlet waistcoat, chuckled with other locals at his good fortune. He told anyone that would listen; his Halfway House would soon teem with travelers from all over California. He claimed the great United States would improve the transportation infrastructure. Even trains could run there someday.

“You there.” Howe hailed Joaquin. “*Mi amigo de Mexico.*”

Joaquin stopped and offered his hand. “Mr. Howe.”

“Ah, *tu familia. Que bonita.* If it gets too crowded at the Feliz place, why not come stay at my inn, Mr. ...?”

“Carrillo,” Joaquin reminded him.

“Yes, yes, *Señor Carrillo.* A drink at the bar on me, to smooth over the relations between our two great nations.” Joaquin heard Howe chuckle to himself. No secret, that, that the old *californios* still resented their American statehood. The Felizes were no different, and Howe must have known that. His eyes caught those of another potential patron, and he dropped Joaquin’s hand before shambling away.

Joaquin and his family walked down the narrow alley between the stalls. Around them,

“talkers” shouted out their minor attractions: games of chance, scantily clad tribal women from the steaming jungles of Panama in cooch dances, and creaking, hand-cranked rides. The Carrillos were here, though, for one reason. To see the calf. Or at least, that’s what Joaquin let his son believe. He and Rosa knew better.

Joaquin thought again of the head. His sister, writing their mother from her own home in Murphy’s Diggins a few years earlier, told her of its existence. Joaquin had taken the letter from his mother. His sister could not know where or even if he lived, not yet anyway; her mouth was too big. Profanities littered the page, words which could not be cooled by its winter’s travel south. She cursed the governor, the Rangers, Ignacio Lisarraga -- little Ignacio’s namesake -- everyone she felt was involved in Joaquin’s betrayal. *I laughed at them, those rangers and their Harry Love*, she had written. *I told them they were fools. This is not Joaquin! Mama, I do not know who this head belongs to, but Joaquin lives. Believe that in your heart.*

But who was it? To whom did Joaquin owe his very life and the life of his unborn child? Did he deprive another child of a father?

“There it is, Papa.” Ignacio pulled ahead again, tugging hard at his father’s already sore arm. At the end of the narrow midway crouched the tent containing the infamous cow and the possibly more infamous pair of jars.

“Twenty-five cents,” the talker cried. “Twenty-five cents to see all the wonders held within.”

Again, Rosa’s hand landed on her husband’s shoulder. He could sense her trepidation. “Joaquin, do you think this is a good idea?”

He thought for a moment. He looked down at his son’s wide eyes. “I see no harm in it,” he told her. After all, everyone thought he was dead, and there was no way his son could know

his true identity. The boy was bright, yes, and had a keen eye, but even in Trincheras, the citizens had taken to calling the Murietas “Carrillo” even before Ignacio was born; the townsfolk eagerly protected a family of such renowned and generous spirit. Any *americanos* who happened to come to Trincheras were told slyly that there was nothing east of town but scrubland. No, *señor*, no ranches there.

They walked the last few yards to the tent, where the talker stood, cane in hand to point at the large, canvas posters tacked to the walls of the tent.

“Twenty-five cents...American currency.” The talker’s eyes seemed to rest on Joaquin for only a moment before returning to scan of the crowd. “Twenty-five cents buys you the chance to see the many wonders of the civilized and uncivilized worlds. See an enormous rat captured in the Bowery slums of New York. View, if you dare, an authentic set of George Washington’s wooden teeth. Carved, supposedly, from the heartwood of the very cherry tree he chopped down in his youth.”

A gasp issued from the crowd as the man’s cane landed with the soft thump against the canvas of the poster. The next affiche he pointed to featured a painting of a buxom, topless woman with hair the color of mustard flowers and a fish’s tail.

“Witness for yourself the corpse of a real mermaid from the South Seas. Observe the travesty of nature that is Virgil, the two headed bull calf.”

Ignacio’s grip tightened momentarily on his father’s hand. His gaze fell on the poster of the bull. In the painting, its four nostrils shot flames past shining brass nose rings. Its coat shone black and glossy. Two sets of horns jutted from its two heads, and its giant shoulders bunched with muscles.

Joaquin pondered the outcome of a bullfight between a two-headed bull and a skilled

matador. There would be no clean kill through the back of the neck with that, given it had two necks. The audience would hate it.

“And finally...” No painted display illustrated the last attraction. Instead, the talker raised his cane up as he stepped forward toward the absorbed crowd. “...the thing that many of you have come to see, from as far as south as San Luis Obispo and as far north as Petaluma. The hand of notorious criminal Three Finger Jack and the head of the infamous bandito, the Robin Hood of El Dorado...Joaquin Murieta!”

The crowd sighed, and a few clapped.

Joaquin looked back at Rosa, raising the corner of his mouth in a half-smile of reassurance. It did little good; her anxiety ruled her face, and it seemed no amount of reassurances would conquer it.

“Papa, is it the man from the stories? From the *corridos*?” Ignacio asked, looking up at him.

Joaquin had told Ignacio stories, but he had cast them in the same light as the Grimm’s fairy tales the boy also liked to hear. *Once upon a time, in the faraway land of California there was a great bandito named Joaquin...* Ignacio liked the stories, he said, because the main character had the same Christian name as his papa, even though they had nothing in common.

With the last announcement, the talker spun on his heel, used the cane to push aside the flap of the tent, and reached out an empty hand. “So now, if you dare, pay your coin and enter the Tent of Wonders.”

Some of the crowd, eager to be the first to see the assortment of amazing sights within, pushed ahead of Joaquin and his family. He fished three quarter-dollar coins out of his pocket and, once most of the crowd had cleared, dropped them into the hand of the talker. Joaquin,

Ignacio, and Rosa stepped into the darkness of the tent.

Behind them, the flap fell closed, blocking the sunlight. The air inside the tent, full of the exhalations of the crowd and Virgil, hung over Joaquin. He tried to take a deep breath, but the air seemed too thick to breathe. He smelled the scent of sick cattle; he knew it all too well. Ignacio's hand clutched his still, slick with perspiration. Had Ignacio learned that smell too? He'd spend enough time in his short life in the pens with the cows.

"Welcome!" From out of the darkness stepped another carnival worker, wearing a brocade waistcoat over a shirt with his sleeves rolled up. A bowler hat perched on his head. He carried a kerosene lamp with the shade closed. "Welcome one and all to the Tent of Wonders. You have been promised some amazing sights today, and I will not disappoint!"

He led them to a corner, a covered wooden crate resting there. Joaquin heard scratching from within. The guide threw back the corner of the cover and unshaded his lamp, pointing its eye toward the contents of the crate.

"Behold, captured by a fire squad deep in the Bowery of New York. Hundreds of times larger than any other known city rat. Some say he got this big by feasting on the flesh of human corpses."

When he was a boy, Joaquin had traveled to South America on a trip with his father to buy a bull. He knew a capybara when he saw one. Mange had thinned its bristling fur, and its haunches, which should have been full, had withered from malnutrition. When Joaquin had seen them in the wild, their robust appearance had amazed him. They fed well on the riverweeds and fruits of the Amazon. He had understood why they were a food staple of the natives, but this...creature...was nothing like those animals.

"Papa?" Ignacio's voice shook slightly. When he was younger, a rat had bitten him, and

the family had gone through many a restless day waiting to see if any illness would manifest. Since then, Ignacio had always had a mild fear of the animals.

“He’s in a cage,” Joaquin reminded him. “He will not bite you unless he put your hand in.”

Ignacio took a step back, dropped his father’s hand, and clutched both of his own to his chest, turning his back to the rat at the same time.

The teeth that had belonged to George Washington appeared to be real enough, though they could have been anyone’s dentures.

“And here, brought from the South Seas by Captain James Cook himself and acquired by our illustrious owner at great expense, the mummified remains of a real and authenticated mermaid. It is said, like Homer’s Sirens, she could seduce men to their deaths in depths of the ocean.”

The guide flashed his beam through a glass box. Inside rested the corpse.

Joaquin peered closely at the mermaid; someone had constructed it from the shriveled remnants of some kind of small shark and the head and torso of a shaved monkey. Joaquin had seen plenty of monkeys in his time. Some charlatan had placed a doll’s wig of golden hair on the monkey’s head, attempting to complete the illusion. The wig looked much too bright and clean when viewed in contrast to the mummified remains of the hodgepodge animal.

Finally, the carnie pushed the crowd through the tent to the place where Virgil stood, staked to the ground. The beam of the lantern evidently inadequate, the guide pushed back another flap of the tent, and the sun fell on Virgil’s two heads. Joaquin heard Ignacio suck in his breath. Sure enough, standing in the dusty, thick light was a spindly-legged calf, its head huge and malformed. Half of it seemed to be normal, but hanging off one side, like a giant goiter, was

a small, malformed jaw, nose, and set of small, milky eyes. One set of the calf's nostrils flared with labored breath. The other appeared dead.

Had one of Joaquin's cows birthed something like that, he would have put it out of its misery and then called the priest to bless the mother so it wouldn't happen again. The image he had in his mind of some great, mythical beast, with four gleaming horns and snorting out clouds of smoke as the poster had shown, quickly fled, and Joaquin laughed at himself for having been so ignorant.

The carnie dropped the curtain and then turned to the audience. "Now, for the last wonder, the thing I know you all are so eager to see. The thing you will soon be able to see...for only one dollar more."

The crowd moaned. There was always a catch, wasn't there? But Joaquin felt relief rather than annoyance. Did he really need to lay eyes on the head? They had seen the calf, and now he could take his son out of the tent without having to lay his eyes on the jars. A dollar was a lot, after all, and would it truly bring him peace? Behind him, someone outside raised the flap of the exit. Joaquin grabbed Ignacio's hand and made a step to leave.

"Wait!" the carnie in the brocade waistcoat said. "Are you afraid to see these remains, *señor*?"

Joaquin turned toward the carnie. Rosa touched his empty hand and leaned toward him.

"I want to see it," she told him quietly. She lowered her voice even more. "I want to see these things that set us free."

Joaquin released Ignacio's hand again and took out two dollar coins. He stepped forward and handed them to the carnie.

"Surely I don't need to pay for the boy," Joaquin said.

The carnie smiled and opened a curtain that led into a small, adjoining tent. There, on two pedestals in the middle of the floor, sat the jars. In the close air, the chamber smelled of alcohol. Light entered through a few openings in the walls of the tent, enough so that viewers could clearly see in the contents of the jars.

Mounted on the display plinths were reproductions of signed affidavits from many of Joaquin's closest friends; one that carried quite a lot of weight with the authorities had been from Ignacio Lisarraga. He and Joaquin had been close since childhood, and Lisarraga had known all along that Joaquin had escaped. The documents promised that, indeed, these were the remains of Joaquin Murieta and Three Fingered Jack.

Joaquin sighed and stepped closer. Rosa had taken Ignacio's hand and held the boy back. Other spectators pushed past the woman and her son, joining Joaquin as he peered into the jar.

No one spoke as they stood there, looking at the head. Joaquin had not known until now which of his *compadres* had sacrificed himself so that he could live to be a father. And now...

Who was he?

Joaquin tried to make out some feature, to find some identifying mark that would tell him which of his gang had taken his destiny.

Rosa finally stepped up beside him. "He is not very good looking, is he?" she said. Joaquin glanced at her. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes glistened with unshed tears, but she had made a joke.

Joaquin looked back at the jar. The brandy proved inadequate at preserving the flesh, and some had started to decay, floating in the mixture in flakes and threads. Joaquin could tell by the look on Rosa's face that she, too, had no idea whose head sat suspended in that liquor.

"This is it?" Ignacio asked. He tapped a finger on the glass of the jar. "He looks like you,

Papa, only gross.”

Everyone in the gang had worn the same mustache and long hair then, a consequence of living on the run and a tool to make people believe he could be anywhere at once. That hair and mustache remained the only identifiable features that could mark him as one of the gang. But then any man could have had that hair and mustache; during Joaquin’s heyday, some had even copied him in homage. Joaquin panicked. From whom should he ask forgiveness now? To whose spirit did he owe a debt? It could be any of a dozen men, none of whose fates he could divine. It would take candle after candle at the altar, many prayers of intercession.

He would have his mother’s help.

The carnie, who had stepped in with the last of the crowd, moved forward and peered at Joaquin’s face and then at the jar. “Joaquin Murieta, the Robin Hood of the El Dorado, killer of three lawmen and nineteen mine workers, ‘though they were mostly Chinese.’” A chuckle met this remark. Chinese were easy pickings. “Rumored to have stolen over \$100,000 in gold.”

And where had all the money ended up? Joaquin tried to make a quick mental accounting of it but couldn’t quite figure all the gold’s whereabouts. Some of it he had redistributed, as his ill-earned nom de guerre suggested. Most of it he had hidden, and now he could not recover it.

“Papa told me fairy tales about this man,” Ignacio said to the carnie. “He fought for justice.”

“How is that, boy?” the carnie asked. “What did he do?”

“He protected the *californios* from the Americans and Chinese,” Ignacio told the man patiently, sounding like a teacher.

The carnie looked at Joaquin instead of his son. “Really? Why, then, would our illustrious governor offer five thousand dollars to the man who could bring down the bandit?”

The carnie's voice became loud enough for the rest of the gathered crowd to hear. "Because he was a scourge to the new state of California."

"That's not what my papa said." Ignacio raised his voice too, obviously adamant in the defense of his father's stories, ignorant that he argued for more than just the legends his father told him before sleep. "He saved women and children from the *americanos*."

Joaquin's stories had drilled these words, night after night, into Ignacio's head, so it was no wonder the boy repeated them as he would gospel. Joaquin hoped that, someday, Ignacio would know the truth, and he wanted the boy to have a rosy image of the renowned bandit when it finally happened. Joaquin stood now, scrutinized by the milky eyes of his unknown friend's head floating in its marinade. He had feared seeing accusation there or hate, but the cloudy orbs betrayed no thoughts, no blame. Joaquin dropped his gaze and looked at the straw-covered ground. He had wanted so badly to know the face there, to have his closure and be healed before he was made again a father. He wanted his trip home to Mexico that of a joyous family, his heart as innocent as his new child's would be.

"Ignacio, that's enough," he whispered.

"But, Papa --"

Instead, he came to the realization that he, too, was nothing more than one of these mock-ups of reality. Were there mermaids swimming in the waters off the Sandwich Islands? Did rats grow to the size of small ponies in New York? Was there ever a great outlaw that stood up for the rights of people when the *americanos* took over? No, there was only a thief and a murderer.

"Papa?"

Ignacio's whine grated on Joaquin's nerves. "*¡Bastante!*" Joaquin took a calming breath, and then looked at the carnie. "Forgive my son. He becomes easily caught up in the stories I tell

him.” Joaquin laid a hand on his son’s head. “Let’s go, *mijo*.” He scooped Ignacio up into his arms, as much to comfort the boy as to shield himself from the looks of the crowd. Joaquin turned away from the jars to face his wife. He felt naked and wanted nothing more than to be back on his hacienda, among his cattle and dogs. “*Quiero ir a casa. Ir a Mexico.*” He bred bulls now, lived the quiet life in country. No bandit, he, no hero of *corridos*. No exhibit in a sideshow. A father, though. A man of the earth. Truth lay in that. Reality lay in that, and there was no shame.

“*Si*,” Rosa replied. “We will go home after the baby comes. I need to be with my mother, here, for that.”

“I know.”

He pushed through the tent flap, crossed the larger tent, and then shoved out into the early afternoon sunlight, Rosa following.

Outside, Joaquin set Ignacio down and took his wife’s hand. Ignacio walked a few steps ahead of his parents as they left the fair.

Ignacio turned back. “Can we get a treat, Papa? *Yo tengo hambre.*” Ignacio corrected himself. “I’m hungry.”

“Your *Abuela Feliz* will make you something special when we get back to the ranch.”

Ignacio’s face betrayed his disappointment. He looked away again, and they left the fair, quickly entering the field of grain and scrub that made up the valley floor.

“Who was it, really?” Rosa asked quietly as they walked.

Joaquin shook his head. He would never know. His gang had scattered, some dead, some in jail, some on the run as he was. His friends and allies were forever lost to him. His choices had brought that upon him. Joaquin watched his son’s back, the late afternoon sunlight casting a long

shadow of the boy across the ground, like an arrow home. It was not a life he would wish on this child or the child yet unborn, and yet what had he done? Glorified the killings, the stealing...

Ignacio tripped over something and fell headlong into the scrub. Rosa made a move to help him up, but quickly groaned, and her hand went to her back. Joaquin picked up his son, noticing tears in the boy's eyes.

"I've cut myself, Papa," Ignacio said, holding up his hands. The palms were skinned and bleeding. "But I won't cry. Joaquin Murieta would not cry, would he?"

Joaquin sighed. "You would be surprised, *mijo*, how many tears he has shed."

Ignacio looked worried, but a smile quickly crossed his lips. "Papa, do you think we can breed a two-headed cow? A good, strong one. Not like the one here. It would be a great hit at the *toreo*."

Joaquin chuckled as they walked. He explained to his child his own thoughts on the idea, and Ignacio was all business, attempting to convince his father that the novelty of it would outweigh the audience's displeasure at how long it might take to die in a fight. Rosa, her hands clutched again to her belly as they crested a rise, huffed along beside them.

On the long walk back to the ranch, Joaquin would have plenty of time to think of new stories to tell his son.

From the Gut

1856

Yakov Modin breathes deeply. He grins as the salt spray collects in his eyebrows and flows down his face in tiny rivulets. He rejoices at the heft of the harpoon in his hand, its hemp-wrapped shaft solid in his grip. Behind him, the men of the ship row the light whaleboat toward their prize; she breaches again. Yakov leaps forward in the bow, places a bare foot on the edge of the gunwale; his toes wrap around the edge of the wood. Yakov lifts his spear. He thinks of the wonderful story he will tell his son, how the boy's papa had single-handedly killed the largest whale any of the men had ever seen and of how much money they made from that one carcass. His mind briefly flits to his wife, of the image of her standing on the dock waiting, sadness at his departure painted across his face. But this life, this *now*, leaves little room for anyone or anything else.

“She’s a beauty,” he calls out to the rowers behind him. Oh, what a prize she’ll make! In this moment, Yakov feels most alive, most grounded to sea and earth and man.

Anka took Nikki down to the wharf. She expected Yakov home today. Nikki threw rocks at gulls and chased crabs on the narrow strip of beach. He talked to the fisherman as they came and went. He begged them to take him out on the bay in one of the small crabbing skiffs. The men, who all knew him, patted his head and humored him, promising him that, yes, he could be the mate of the ship if he learned to read and could sign his name.

Anka watched the San Francisco Bay with her spyglass and did not pay attention to the boy. She knew Nikki was as comfortable around the water as any of sailors, whalers, or

fisherman that came and went. Her gaze stayed focused on the water, drifting from island to island out to the mouth of the bay, then back again. She did this each afternoon that her husband was away; she waited for the first sign of the *Elizabeth Dayle*, the herald of his return. His ship. His mistress, Anka thought. Or maybe she was the mistress, the one he fled to when his real wife, the sea, didn't want him. Could he ever leave the sea for her? Anka wondered. She doubted it.

They waited together for an hour, but she had no sign of the ship. The *Elizabeth Dayle* did not come today.

"I see him," a sailor exclaimed, taking out a great knife from his belt and crouching in the stinking, visceral mess. After a few careful slices, he reached into the guts and pulled out a body. Yakov resembled a newborn cut from its caul.

"He's breathing, barely," another whaler noted as he stopped working and watched. Yet more sailors joined the rescuer and helped pull the body onto the cutting stage. They laid him down among the blankets of flesh and blubber they had already cut. Many hands turned him and slapped his back until yellow bile trickled from his lips, followed by spastic coughs of seawater. Yakov finally heaved a great breath, opened his swollen eyes, and began to scream.

From the deck of the schooner, the captain cried, "Get him up here! The rest of you, finish cutting the blankets!" Hands passed Yakov up from the cutting stage, over the side of the ship and to the captain, then returned quickly to work.

Workers pulled skin and blubber away from the carcass and hoisted it up to the deck. The busy men cut the blankets down into smaller and smaller pieces, until each slice was no bigger than a family Bible. These they stacked by the tryworks. A watchful man stoked the fire, and

another threw the bits into the large, iron pot where they cooked down into precious oil.

Yakov continued to scream, stopping briefly to catch his breath. The rum the captain gave him only sputtered back out of his mouth in aerated bursts. Around them, all the sailors, all the whalers, worked, stealing cautious glances at Yakov. Many, for a moment, doubted the decisions they had made, cursed the day they'd first set foot on a ship. To see a man come out like that... Others crossed themselves and lifted their medallions to their lips, thanking God and all the saints, for they must have just witnessed a miracle.

Then again, there was work to be done, and none could stop to wonder for long.

Below, in a dark cabin, he hides. There, the heat of the guts of the beast never seems to leave him; he is feverish with it. The air in the cabin, close and hot and dark, reminds him of the whale. He must suffer here, though, because he cannot go on deck either. He came out once, but the glare of the sun on his etched and bleached skin left him cringing in pain, and the sea, vast and dark around him, reminded him of all the things that dwelt therein, mostly of the whales. The other sailors tried to hide their shock when they saw him, but he had witnessed their glances, heard the hushed exclamations of disbelief.

Yakov cannot wash. The seawater stings his skin, and there is not enough of the fresh to waste, so the smell, *the smell of it*, clings to him; it ripens, stifling him, then begins to fade. How many more days will it be? Three, four? He lies in his hammock, his back turned to the men as they enter and leave, their shifts ending, beginning. Bells ring. Always the bells and their watch changes. He tries to splice rope, to be of some help, but he cannot bear the look of his own hands, the veins coursing beneath the thin, white veil of his dermis.

The cook comes, brings him food, water. Yakov only rises to relieve himself, only above

deck after dark so he cannot see the expanse of the ocean and so no one else would see him.

The captain comes behind him one night. Tells him, “Yakov, three more nights, we’ll be back to San Francisco. The ownership, they’ll look after you. I’ll see to it.”

Yakov knows he can never set foot on a ship again, and he’s done none but harpooning since he could heft the spear. He loves the sea, can think of no place else he wants to work, nothing else he wants to do. She is a bitch to have done this to him, turned him into this paradox, an impotent sailor afraid of the ocean but yearning, completely and utterly, for it.

He spares his next thought for his family. He turns his parchment face to the captain. “My wife, child...” Yakov murmurs.

Very few men make their fortunes on the whaling ships, though many have tried, and Yakov has yet to fulfill the promise he swore to Anka when she accepted his hand. He told her only a few years at sea, and then he would make her rich. He could have brought her the riches, but he could never leave the sea. Now... now he has neither. He shakes his head and lowers his eyes. The captain coughs and turns away. Yakov knows that even this hardened sailor can’t stomach the change that’s come over him.

Three nights pass, and the lamps at the wharves light the way of the *Elizabeth Dayle* to her berth. She rests while others do their work, unloading cask after cask of rendered whale fat, \$1.77 a gallon. The captain pays out the shares (a profitable journey, this one), and the men leave off alone and in pairs. The money will be spent by morning in the bars and brothels scattered up the hill and away from the bay.

Yakov loiters on the wharf, the wood steady beneath his feet. The collar of his oilskin stands rigid around his neck, and he’s pulled his hat down low over his brow. His wife

waits for him, he knows, in their shiplap shack, scant minutes walk from where he now abides. How will he explain this to her? With the promissory note in his pocket, from the captain, Yakov is to call at the office in the morning. His account, he is promised, will be settled. In the morning? It will be the first time he's gone out in the light since that one day on the ship. And here, on the streets of San Francisco, how will he explain what has happened to him?

Anka will have drawn a bath; he knows word of the ship's arrival met her when the crew unloaded the first cask. Fresh water to wash off this rank legacy. His feet land heavy as he leaves the wharf, walks up and away from the *Elizabeth Dayle*. He turns once to look at her in the dark, lit by smoking torches. It may be the last time he sees her. With the next evening tide, she'll leave again, and for the first time, he cannot board her with the others. His shame heats his face, makes it feel as if he's back in the guts, and then he moves away.

His wife proves him right. A single candle lights the hovel as he comes in. He finds the tub filled with water, only a fraction warmer than the air; it has sat awhile. A bar of soap stands at the ready. Anka already sleeps. The ship held much oil, and it all had to be unloaded before anyone could leave.

Yakov takes off his clothes. His hands, face, the parts of legs between the tops of his boots and the bottoms of the rough, canvas cut-offs he wore while on ship... all of it, like Bible pages, thin onion skins. He looks down at himself; these pieces do not seem to be him. It seems that some strange phenomenon has come and replaced his own hands, feet, and head with someone else's. Anka had lost a baby once. Yakov remembers taking the tiny fetus away to bury it and how its skin, below the skim of hemorrhaged blood, was translucent like his now. It's as if that lost daughter has come back to him, now a part of him.

Yakov slips into the bath, which smells of the soap Anka uses to do the laundry. He

submerges himself, bending his legs so the tops of the knees float above the water like twin icebergs, but his head goes under, down, down. He lies there in the silent stillness. Here, with his eyes closed in the lukewarm bath, he forgets what has happened. This water holds no threat, no salt-stinging tang, no reek of fish or whale. Finally, Yakov's lungs hunger for air, and he raises his head again above the water, to the present, to where he can see his hands, feebly clutching at the edges of the tub. He buries them deep in the water. The soap clouds his view.

“Yakov?”

He hears Anka's voice come from the bed. She tells him her mother has taken Nikolai until the morning; she knows he needs to be reacquainted with his son. It has been a long time, but that is better done after a good night's rest.

One of Yakov's hands snakes out, and he drapes a towel over his head. The hand disappears. He worries she has already seen. How long has it been? Yakov looks at her through the thin weave of the cloth, dim in the candlelight. He glances down at his hands, warped by the cloudy bath water. Almost normal. Anka sits up.

“Yakov, will you come to me?”

Yakov lifts the veil of his towel and blows out the candle

He rises from the bath, dripping, and goes to her.

To the sound of the trash cart and feral chickens scratching at the porch, Yakov awakens. Beside him, covered over in a light blanket, lies his naked wife. Yakov watches her sleep. In the dark, in her arms the night before, he had felt almost normal, almost the man he had been before he left. But now, as the new day breaks and his hands stand out ghostly on the gray wool blanket, the feeling fades.

Before the sun rises up, Yakov leaves, muffled in his scarf and hidden from the eyes of men. He makes his way to the offices, stands outside as the sun comes up. Yakov hears the bells at the courthouse ring seven, eight, nine. He waits. By half past, the clerks begin to trickle in. Then Yakov sees the owner in a beaver hat, carrying a crystal-knobbed cane. Yakov watches the man enter the building, waits until the bell strikes quarter to the hour, then goes in. He gives his name to a clerk. The clerk offers to take his hat and coat, but Yakov refuses. After a short minute's wait, the clerk shows Yakov to the owner's office.

Yakov's harpoon paid for all this: the gilded globe of the world, the leather-bound books, and the clock on the mantel over the cheery fire. All these things, the result of some other man leaving his family, some other man risking his life, some other man dying in the sea.

"Thank you for coming," the owner, an American from the East Coast, says. He stands from his desk and offers a hand. Yakov removes his gloved hand from his pocket and, misunderstanding, produces the captain's note. The owner smiles and takes it. He unfolds the paper. He chuckles, reads, turns to the clerks standing ready at his right, then left, reads more, and then sits in his chair.

Yakov swallows.

"Have you read this note?" the owner asks Yakov.

Yakov cannot read. He shakes his head.

"The captain tells me, quite succinctly, that you experienced quite a traumatic experience. How are you feeling?"

"The burns...they heal," Yakov says.

"So other than the burns, you're all right? No injuries to your limbs?"

Yakov shakes his head.

“The captain asks me to allot you some sort of pension. These injuries you’ve had will prevent you from working for us again?”

Yakov remembers the rush of cold water as he fell, the harpoon ripping from his hand, the dark mass moving around him, indistinct in his shocked and burning eyes. He remembers the scrape of the baleen, then the heat and the burning. He shakes his head again.

“Yakov, I have to tell you,” the owner begins, “that we appreciate the service you have given this company over the years, but you can’t possibly expect that we are going to pay for your own folly.” The owner stands, comes out from behind his desk, and circles Yakov, his hands clasped behind his back. “After all, look at you. You seem sturdy enough yet. I can’t see any reason why you shouldn’t join the *Elizabeth Dayle* this evening.”

Yakov knows there is no way he can return to the sea; he cannot even imagine looking at another whale.

“I have little patience for men who let their minds interfere with a good day’s work,” the owner tells him.

Yakov thinks this man has never done a good and proper day’s work in his life. He asks if he can expect anything in the form of compensation. He reminds the owner of his wife and son.

“Your wife!” The owner laughs. “She does my shirts, man! I have no concern for her well-being. She gets along well enough without you.” With those words, the owner returns to his seat and turns his back to Yakov.

Yakov removes his gloves and hat, the scarf he’d wrapped around his face. He hears the two clerks gasp, and the owner turns around again. The man’s chest heaves in a deep breath, and his eyelids seem to disappear into his head. After another breath, he chuckles again and looks

away.

“Well, then there’s always the freak show, isn’t there?” he tells Yakov, trying to look at him again and failing. “See the world and all that. I’m done with you now. You’re lucky you got your share from the *Elizabeth Dayle* last night. By all accounts, you didn’t even work the last week of the voyage.” The owner waves a hand dismissively.

The owner’s words strike Yakov dumb. These words, glib as they are, confirm all his fears. He cannot even bring home this last gift for his wife. The whale rendered him powerless. The public will not tolerate him, he cannot return to the sea, so all that remains is to live as a burden to his wife, locked away from prying eyes, depending on her for everything. That will not do.

One of the clerks steps forward and, with a sweep of his hand, motions Yakov to the door. Yakov covers himself back up and lets himself be led. Another clerk greets him there and, firmly, shows him back out to the street. It is not yet ten.

Yakov stands in front of the owner’s office, staring at the space of ground between his boots. All Yakov has known is the harpoon. He can do little else. He walks toward the water, thinking that perhaps another look at the *Elizabeth Dayle*, the only other lady he has ever loved besides Anka, will pull him back to himself.

She sits high in the water, freed from her cargo, and Yakov finds a small tavern nearby. From its open door, he gazes at the ship, trying to convince himself that maybe the sun and sea air is what he needs to relieve his disfigurement. He remembers loving the sea. It was the thing that, when he was a child, had always brought his father back to him, and it had always brought Yakov back to Anka and Nikki. Yakov cannot convince himself, however, to return and instead drinks bottle after bottle of ale. The sun moves toward its zenith, then begins to dip down toward

the west.

Yakov places a small share of his payout from the night before on the table and leaves the tavern. Seeing the ship has not had the desired effect, and the drink has only muddled his thoughts the more. He hopes seeing his wife will give him another purpose.

Anka works at the house, doing another man's laundry in the tub in which Yakov bathed the night before. The man's shirts and underthings hang from cords strung across the room, crisscrossing from side to side. She does not turn when he enters; the sound of her hands moving the laundry up and down the washboard must drown out the sound of the door.

Yakov takes off his gloves, hat, and scarf. He approaches, each leg unsteady as if he were on the first day of another voyage. He takes Anka's hands out of the suds in his own. She jumps with surprise and then turns to him, a soft smile on her lips. Her eyes go wide as she sees his face, and the corners of her mouth drop as her lips part. She looks down at his hands and pulls away. He watches her gaze trace the blue veins, now all too obvious through the insubstantial netting of skin that covers them.

"What happened?" Anka asks. She will not look at his face. Her breath seems to have escaped her body, and her words come in a hoarse whisper.

"I..." Yakov does not know how to continue, how to put into words that one slipped step (*I will forever regret that misplaced foot*, Yakov tells himself), the hot, terrifying hours that followed. "I cannot go back to sea," he tells her.

Anka nods in understanding and asks no more questions. She turns, and her hands slip back into the suds, her arms working up and down over the washboard. Up and down. Up and down. The repetition of it makes Yakov's head hurt. He goes to sit on the bed and then lies down. He can hear Anka weeping quietly as she works.

“How can you love *this*?” Yakov asks. He stares at the underside of the roof. Then he raises his head slightly to look at his wife when she does not answer.

“We will make it work,” Anka replies. “We have always made it work.”

After a time, the weeping stops, but the scrubbing continues. Yakov hears the front door open and a book hit the floor near the door. Yakov raises his head in time to see his son stop dead in his run for the bed, presumably to leap on his father in welcome. Instead of a happy shout and hug, Nikolai stands, his breath coming in ragged, sharp sobs.

“Look away, boy,” Yakov tells him. Like an automaton, the boy spins stiff on his heel, but Yakov can still hear his sobs. Anka comes to Nikolai, her hands covered in bubbles.

“I’ll talk to him,” she says and steers her boy back out of the shack.

I scare my own son, Yakov thinks. He catches his reflection in Anka’s small mirror, hanging by her side of the bed. What good is this? Yakov remembers his boss’s words, how Anka was better off without him. Was that really what the man said? Yakov can’t remember. The morning is far off, hazy, and Yakov is drunk. But it doesn’t matter. The man refused to honor a debt. Now, Yakov’s son cannot love him, fears him, and he cannot take care of his boy. If it were not for that man and his ship, Yakov would still be normal.

Yakov takes up his scarf, hat, gloves, and coat. He peels off most of the bills from his share of the ship’s cargo and leaves them on the bed.

Yakov goes from the house, passing Anka on the porch, trying not to look at his son whose large eyes follow the ghost that was his father.

Tears well in Yakov’s eyes as he walks away. By sunset, he has found the club where the owner dines. Yakov takes a table in a corner, spends the last of his money on a steak and a few pints, and waits. When the owner stands to leave, Yakov rises too, approaches him, and slips a

penknife between the ribs of the ungrateful man. The rush he gets resembles the feeling he used to have when jabbing a harpoon into a whale. For a moment, he seems to regain his power,

“You can’t take your fucking globe and beaver hat to your grave with you.” Yakov spits, wipes his blade on the owner’s jacket, and turns to leave. Once the other diners overcome their shock, they chase him out, but one flash from his skull-like head stops the pursuers dead in their tracks.

Yakov’s pockets are full of stones, and he walks to the wharf where the *Elizabeth Dayle* is docked. His shipmates arrive for their next journey. Those that saw him on the ship, who seem to have adjusted to his new facade, greet him half-heartedly. From the door of the tavern where Yakov spent his morning, others are entertaining a last girl, stealing a final kiss before they return to sea. Yakov sees them; he is hatless now. He’s made no attempt to hide his head since his flight from the club. As his mates watch, Yakov steps off the end of the pier, the frigid water closing in over his head, cooling the heat that had been burning him these days, ever since he was pulled from the gut. It is a blessed chill, a welcomed cold. Here in the water at night, there is no expanse, no promise of whales and ships. No working wife, no scared son. Only darkness and the cold.

Darkness and the cold.

So welcome.

Out beyond, in the bay, dolphins breach and chitter.

Weeks later, when the papers had stopped printing the story, and the speculation had been put to rest, Anka went to visit her husband’s grave. Though some of his shipmates had followed him

into the water, hoping to bring him back alive, they had been unsuccessful. When Anka arrived with Nikki in tow, another woman was there. Anka recognized her; she used to wash her husband's shirts. The widow of the man Yakov killed. The husbands' graves lay side-by-side, and chance had brought the two women to mourn, at the same hour on the same day, to Yerba Buena Cemetery. Anka's face burned red, but the woman saw her and beckoned her to approach. Anka, raised with respect for aristocracy -- and this woman was certainly that -- couldn't refuse.

"Rest assured, the company will take care of you," the owner's wife told Anka as they both stood, staring at their respective markers, the owner's a large carved marble slab, Yakov's a simple wooden cross with his name and date of death painted on; Anka hadn't known the day of his birth. Control of the business fell to the woman on her husband's death, she explained to Anka, and she would make good on her promise. "I know how hard this life can be for us women." The woman explained that her husband, too, had started as a harpooner on the east coast. She had spent many cold days on the cliffs of Massachusetts waiting for his return. "Many months away from us on their precious ships, hunting their precious whales. Only a few days in our arms and then off again."

Anka squeezed Nikki's hand. He fidgeted in her firm grasp; his eyes watched a squirrel that perched on a nearby wooden cross, much like his father's.

"Patience, Nikki," she said, then to the richly dressed widow, "I thank you, but I can't take any money. It would not be right for me to...given what happened." This choked out. "I think we will survive. We leave for Angel's Camp tomorrow. Many miners there need their shirts washed, and I'm sure to find another husband, eventually." Anka had few other options. The family of another whaler waited to move into the company's tiny shack she had called home since she had married Yakov.

“Our husbands were such strangers to us, were they not?” The owner’s wife dabbed at the corner of her eye with a handkerchief. “All men cheat, and ours had the seas as their mistress. At least now we will always know where they are.” Her laugh sounded forced as she turned away.

Anka watched the woman go. She released Nikki’s hand, and he ran toward the squirrel, which, quicker than the boy, darted away. Angel’s Camp was as far from the sea as Anka’s meager savings could carry them. She would not bury her son next to his father, nor bear another son this close to the bay. Their new father would be a miner, not a whaler.

Anka placed her rough, tanned hand on her belly. It didn’t show yet, but she knew.

In the Fist of the Buddha

1886

Lee Huang-Fu lifted a rock from the floor of the tunnel and placed it into his cart.

As he worked, he remembered the story of the Monkey King and the Buddha. The Monkey King made a bet with the Buddha that he was much more powerful than the Enlightened One. The Enlightened One then told the Monkey King, “There is nowhere in this great Universe that I cannot find you.”

The Monkey King laughed at this, grabbed his magic staff, and sped off into the Universe. He traveled until he came to its very edge. There, he found five stone pillars holding up the arch of space.

“Are you here, Buddha?” the Monkey King, the cleverest of all monkeys, called out. He received no answer. The Monkey King laughed again, knowing he had beaten the Buddha. He wrote his name across the pillars and pissed at their bases to mark his territory. Then he returned to Heaven.

“Where was I?” the Monkey King demanded, sure the Buddha could not possibly know. The Buddha held up his hand. The Monkey King’s name was scrawled across his fingers, and his palm smelled of monkey piss.

“There is nowhere in this great Universe that I cannot find you,” the Buddha repeated, and his court burst into laughter at the expense of the Monkey King.

Lee felt that he was the Monkey King, and the white boss was Buddha, only without the compassion and enlightenment. As the Buddha had trapped the Monkey King in the grasp of his fist, so had the white boss trapped Lee.

Lee lifted another rock into the cart. In the distance, he heard the shouts of his fellow workers as they prepped a blast of dynamite down the tunnel; he should be fine where he worked, filling cart after cart with rubble. Soon, they'd move him farther in, away from the entrance of the tunnel. He liked being able to see the bit of sky out there. He could mark the end of his shift as it darkened. Deeper in, where only lamplight shone, he couldn't tell, and it made his day harder. A few workers ran past him and ducked behind an outcropping in the wall. Then the blast came, followed by a cloud of dust and a shower of gravel. Lee adjusted the cloth covering his mouth and continued working. Soon he could signal his twenty-man team that they could break for tea and rice; he knew it by the angle of the sun's light.

Lee loaded another rock, checked the sun again, and pushed his cart toward the entrance. On the incline leading up to the tunnel, workers assembled the track. The track would push right through the tunnel as soon as other workers completed blasting and reinforcing. Lee maneuvered his cart down the plane and dumped its contents over the edge, into the gully that paralleled the new track. He left the cart at the edge and rounded up his team. They traveled down the new track, then down a switchback path that led straight into the gully. There, on the banks of a narrow creek where steelhead trout spawned, hunkered the tents and cabins that made up the homes of the workers. It approximated a town, complete with commerce and racially segregated neighborhoods and entertainment. The men sat around the ring of a campfire. From a tripod over dying embers hung a pot of boiled tea, luke-warm now but refreshing. Buried in the coals sat a second pot, still warm, of rice flavored with preserved ginger, dried shrimp, and soy sauce. Lee served out equal portions of rice to all of his workers, and they filled their own enamelware cups with tea. They all sat around in a companionable group to chat during their break.

Lee sighed and set his bowl of rice down in the dirt. He had heavy news to share, news

not to be well received.

“My friends,” he began. He knew his request would not be graciously accepted. “I must beg you to listen carefully and think hard on these words.” He stood and ran his hands down the long line of his *cheongsam*, over his thighs. He looked at his broken nails, the ends ragged and black with dirt. When he’d left China, it had been with the promise to himself that someday he would live the life of a magistrate here in America.

His scores on the civil exams back home had restricted his upward mobility, but recruiters had promised him that if he would just relocate to America, where those scores did not matter, he could see great wealth. He’d agreed, but things here had been worse than in China. There, he’d lived in his own small house and had steady work in the fields. He thought he’d get a step up here: a bigger house, his own land, people under his command. He had people, true, but menial laborers, and he lived in a tent miles and miles away from his wife. She was the only benefit he had received from coming to America; if he’d stayed in China, he would have never met her. He wanted to give her so much, to ensure her place in society, but so far, he had failed miserably at that.

Several years had passed now, and he was still just a laborer. In America, he couldn’t even practice his martial arts for recognition. People knew Lee throughout his native region for his kung fu. Here, though, if the white boss caught him practicing, even on a Sunday when there was no work, he would be punished and possibly fired. So he had to do it at night, when the fires burned low and the white men slept in their wood cabins. The number of men who joined him in the moonlight had grown steadily through the months. He did not often teach kung fu, however, but rather offered up his tai chi to help the men relax and center themselves. He hoped they had taken his lessons to heart, had learned to quiet their souls and remember compassion as he told

them what he needed to tell them.

“The Chinese merchants from San Francisco have again raised their prices.”

A murmur of dissent met this statement.

“This saddens me as well, for I feel our own countrymen take advantage of us. They tell me it costs more to bring our goods from overseas or to create suitable duplicates here. They say it costs more to travel here to the work site than it used to.” Lee raised his hands in frustration, palms up. He looked at the blisters there for a moment. “Whatever their reasons, we must pay what they ask, and you must give me more to do it.”

“Pardon, Huang-Fu, but I propose another option.”

Lee looked at the speaker, a large man with arms as thick as a bear’s legs. He drove railroad spikes and called himself Bull Horns as if he were some thug in a Peking street syndicate instead of a legitimate employee of the Southern Pacific. Bull Horns did not visit Lee’s tai chi sessions. Lee regretted this because he knew that Bull Horns was not as even tempered as some of the other men in his gang. Bull Horns never called Lee *sifu* or *shang-si* as he should, but instead always by his given name, as if they had attended school together at the temple as boys.

Bull Horns continued, “You will go to the white bosses, *teacher*, and you will ask them to give us more money.”

A collective rush of breath sounded around the group. Who would suggest such a thing?

“I have heard of Chinese workers striking elsewhere,” Bull Horns told them, “demanding better pay and hours from their bosses. If the bosses will not pay us more, we can strike.”

It went against every instinct Lee possessed to consider Bull Horns’ suggestion. Lee

believed his supervisors would reward his hard work, and if his work had gone unnoticed, then he had not worked hard enough. Lee searched the eyes of the men around him. On their faces, he saw varying degrees of consideration. The fire of dissent burned in some gazes. Men seemed ready to drop their shovels and picks and rise up against their bosses. Others appeared more inclined to Lee's own manner of thinking, their visages revealing trepidation.

"Bull Horns has made a suggestion." Lee needed to directly face this opposition and attempt to use logic and compassionate appeals to further his own argument. "This is something we must think on. Have we not been taught that our hard work will be recognized and rewarded? To challenge those that would honor us for our labor will not fill our bellies."

"We could buy food from the American merchants," someone suggested. "I hear they do not charge as much."

Lee shook his head. "I will not ask that of you. It is bad enough for us to be so far from home." To many of the workers, their simple meals of rice, dried fish, pickled pork and cabbage, and other Chinese staples were the only reminders they had of home. Lee had tried the American food, too, and there was something not quite right about it. He imagined the white men would feel the same way about Chinese food.

Some nodded in agreement.

"So we eat the white man's food, or starve our children by sending no money home?" This from another worker. "These are not choices I want to make."

Nods of agreement rippled around the group. A bell rang, signaling that all must return to work before the second bell.

"We will not make any choice now," Lee said as they stood. He looked down at his bowl of rice, nearly full; he would be quite hungry by dusk. "We will talk tomorrow."

As Lee returned to work, he thought of his own wife. She lived in the Sierra Nevada foothills, hundreds of miles away. Her family stayed with her – aunts, cousins – and together they worked a small plot of land to supplement the money their husbands sent back from the railways. If he indulged himself in more expensive food, she would have less. He couldn't allow that. He had already asked her to sacrifice too much.

To Lee, it was not a complete coincidence that the same evening, the white boss called a meeting of the *shang-si*. The Chinese representatives from eight gangs of workers sat in a semi circle on log benches. Mr. Nikolai Modin and his translator stood before them.

Mr. Modin started with a thank you for the hard work the dynamiters and tracklayers had done to this point. He spoke of deadlines, target dates, and the great vision of the Southern Pacific. Finally, he stopped, looked at his translator, sighed, and then scanned the eyes of the *shang-si*.

This, too, came through the translator: “Revered bosses, we know that your stomachs grumble and your hearts ache as indecision tears you. Do you buy food or do you send money to your beloved families? We understand this torment, as we too have family and belly.” The translator stopped to listen to Mr. Modin, thought a moment, and continued. “It is with a glad heart that we offer you this. After speaking with Feliz and Calloway, the Southern Pacific has decided to subsidize a certain portion of your daily fare, *should* you decide to buy from our American contracted merchants. We can assure you that food costs will not increase in the coming months as we push through to victory.” The translator nodded at Mr. Modin. Mr. Modin smiled and raised a hand in farewell to the group. The translator bowed and followed Mr. Modin off into the gathering gloom.

The *shang-si* sat where they were and looked at each other. Cheap white food would not fill their bellies in a satisfactory way. Neither would it their workers.

“Why did we not ask if subsidies could be arranged with Chinese merchants?” Lu said. Lee and the others nodded. Feliz and Calloway only dealt with beans and beef and bread. No mention had been made in regards to subsidies to the Chinese merchants, the dealers from whom the workers actually purchased their fare.

“Would they not be as worthy?” Zhang asked. He pulled a long pipe from his belt and sucked on it thoughtfully even though it did not burn.

Han stood from his seat in the circle and paced. “I believe that Modin would benefit from a liaison between himself and the Chinese merchants.”

“But he has the translator,” Zhongli pointed out. “Should he not function as our liaison?”

“He wears white man’s clothes and has no queue,” Lee said quietly. Long ago, the translator had clearly decided to whom he gave his allegiance, and it was not his Chinese brothers or the code of Confucius. Lee could tell the American dollar ruled his heart. Secretly, he envied the translator for his seamless Americanism and Western garb, but he would never admit to it. These things seemed to mark the translator’s success, and Lee wanted to have such outward displays of wealth as well. He wanted to be able to give them to his wife too. Lee continued. “The Chinese merchants don’t like him any more than we do.” Envy and like were two different things.

“Lee tells the truth,” Cao said. “The merchants won’t deal with him.”

“Just as Feliz and Calloway won’t deal with us,” Lam said.

Some of the *shang-si*, desperate to save money, had already tried to buy food from the two American merchants, but they’d met with an impermeable barrier of language. How did Mr.

Modin propose to fix that issues? Teach the dealers Chinese, or teach the Chinese English? Lee laughed to himself.

“So we starve?” Zhongli asked the group, raising his hands.

“Lee speaks English as well as Modin’s pet does,” Hei said. Lee looked at Hei. Lee had gone to a mission school in China for a while and learned English there. ”He should talk with Modin. He will broach the idea of subsidies with the merchants from San Francisco. He will make sure that they are extended the same opportunity as the American merchants.”

Lee sighed; he did not want that responsibility.

Lu was the foremost among the *shang-si* -- they all knew his score on the imperial exam -
- and all eyes turned to him to see how he would weigh in on the topic.

“We do not want our merchants to feel as if they have been slighted by Mr. Modin. Extending favors to these others without doing them the same honor would most likely shame them and leave us with a greater dilemma than we have now.” He circled a toe in the dirt and watched the pattern it made thoughtfully.

Lee could tell Lu would side with Hei and send him off on some fool’s errand. He would, however, have no choice but to do as Lu told him, for he had to respect his superior. He also had a duty to his own men.

“Lee, you will go and speak with the translator,” Lu told him. ”Through him, approach Mr. Modin. Ask for the same honor of these subsidies to be extended to the Chinese merchants.”

Lu stood. Lee scrambled to his feet and bowed as Lu left the circle. The others, in various positions, bowed as well. Soon after, they too left. Only Lee remained. He sat back on one of the logs to think.

The translator. He even affected an American name, George, though he kept his Chinese

surname, Chan. He put pomade in his hair and wore white spats -- even on the jobsite -- and a waistcoat with a watch chain. Lee sometimes wore a waistcoat over his cheongsam, but generally only on special occasions. He didn't have the luxury of a watch, let alone a chain from which to hang it. He wondered what it would be like to have a watch, to use it to tell the time rather than the work bells or the angle of the sun.

Lee stood, stretched, and traveled off into the darkening night. He found a secluded, flat place beneath an oak, far off from the rest of the camp. There he moved through his Sixty-Four Posture tai chi, an ancient form that always cleared his mind. It took him several minutes. He could mark his time by the angle of the gibbous moon casting its beams through the oak leaves. He did it a second time, slower, before making his way back to camp. Tomorrow he would meet with George Chan and see what could be done. He would enter this meeting with a clear mind and an open heart. Hopefully, he could persuade George Chan to help.

The next day, when the bell sounded for midday meal, Lee washed his hands and face and made his way to Mr. Modin's office. It was a small wood shack that could be disassembled easily and packed onto a freight car. In front of Mr. Modin's office sat a canvas tent outfitted with a cot, table, chair, and ledgers. George Chan had attained his position first as a translator, then as a clerk. He oversaw payroll, moved workers, and planned the execution of the next phase of construction.

At the entrance of the tent, Lee waited for Mr. Chan to finish giving directions to another overseer. He spoke perfect, unaccented Mandarin, even though, Lee knew, his native tongue was Cantonese. When the overseer left, Lee waited patiently for Mr. Chan to invite him into the tent. From here, he couldn't even hear the work being done on the tunnel. Birds sang in the nearby

oak trees, and the air smelled fresh. No dust or dynamite. Lee could see himself in a peaceful setting such as this, a more than adequate benefit of upward mobility, he felt.

“I heard from a little bird that I might expect to see you,” Chan said in Mandarin as he made notes in an open ledger. He offered Lee no entrance, so Lee remained standing, one hand holding the tent flap back at shoulder height. “What is it you expect of me?”

“We wish you to arrange the same subsidies with the Chinese merchants that you have arranged with Feliz and Calloway.”

“Ah, yes.” This in English.

Lee waited, expecting the other man to continue, but no further response came from him. “The American merchants will not deal with us and --”

“Part of the offer made to them when we drew up the official contract was that they must treat all our workers equally,” Chan said, again in Mandarin. “You will have no further trouble dealing with Feliz and Calloway.” Mr. Chan looked up, impatience clear on his face. He hinted with his eyes that the interview had concluded; that was all the quarter he would give. The railroad would not offer the Chinese merchants subsidies. Lee and his ilk should be happy for what they got.

Lee tilted his head. “I see. Thank you, sir.”

Lee turned away from the tent and went to the campfire where his men partook of their meal and drank their tea. Bull Horns’ eyes followed him as he sat and hastily ate a proffered bowl of rice.

“This meeting did not seem to take you so long as you expected,” Bull Horns said. He set his bowl and cup down and stood. He rolled his massive shoulders and crossed the few feet that separated him from Lee. “What news, Huang-Fu?” He stood right at Lee’s feet, staring down at

the smaller man.

Lee kept his eyes on Bull Horns' boots, refusing to meet the challenge by looking him in the face. "We have been guaranteed fair treatment by Feliz and Calloway. It was part of the offer, that they must treat us as they would the white workers."

"Is that what we asked for?" Bull Horns shifted his stance, widening the distance between his feet slightly. Lee noted it, for it appeared as if Bull Horns prepared himself to fight.

"It is what we were given," Lee said. He ate his rice.

"Is this good enough, men?" Bull Horns turned away from Lee to address the group as a whole.

Lee stood, relieved somewhat that the group had distracted Bull Horns. Bull Horns had challenged him by questioning what he had done. It was not Bull Horns' place to do so. It showed disrespect for both Lee and the way of things.

The other workers seemed to understand this. They shared wary glances around the cooking fire, and a few mumbled back and forth. Several didn't just call Lee boss, but also teacher, and as such afforded him more respect than some of the other men that did not study martial arts. Their faces clearly showed disapproval of Bull Horns' actions.

Bull Horns circled the fire, staring down those who dared to look him in the face. "I ask again. Is this good enough?" He stopped in front of one of the dynamiters, a small man capable of climbing into narrow spaces. The small man shook his head, his eyes shifting to Lee. Lee took a slow, deep breath then exhaled. He pivoted the ball of one foot into the earth. He wore rope sandals, not nearly as sturdy as Bull Horns' American boots. He would not let Bull Horn connect any kicks, instead keeping well inside the reach of his legs, making it a game of grappling and hand strikes.

Lee prayed it would not come to that.

Bull Horns finally turned to face Lee across the fire. Lee kept his hands down, wanting to give no indication that he felt this would lead to a fight. Bull Horn smiled, completely disingenuous. He made a little, mocking bow then tossed the long tail of his queue over his shoulder. "Well, teacher, what will you do?" He sidestepped around the fire. Lee held his ground, his fists clenching at his side.

They stood now, mere inches apart. Lee looked Bull Horns in the eye. Bull Horns kung fu would be no match for his own, he knew, but the man had him on sheer force. One lucky punch and --

The bell to return to work rang. Like conditioned animals, all the men set about putting away their dishes and getting back to their positions on the track. Bull Horns only waited a few additional moments, his nostrils flaring as he stared down Lee, before he too returned to work. Lee left the circle last. Though eager to face the mindless drudgery of moving stone, he dreaded what the evening would bring.

The moon had grown slightly fuller and dusted the ground beneath the oak trees in mottled light. Under normal circumstances, Lee would lead a group of about thirty men through several tai chi forms on these nights. He'd taught them Twenty-Four and Sixty-Four, and using broken branches, had taught them a slow, precise sword form as well.

Tonight, however, many more men filled the small clearing than Lee expected. The other seven *shang-si* had come, along with many members of their gangs. Near fifty people stood there in loose clumps surrounding their bosses. The others must have remained in camp to make it appear as if this meeting did not happen.

Some of Lee's own men stood off to one side, waiting for him. Lee did not see Bull Horns. This was not a group prepared for tai chi, but a group standing on the edge of something. No repeated practice of Grasp the Sparrow's Tail would calm them or sway them from their purpose. Lee could see it in their eyes. He, however, did not want to be involved in this. He briefly considered turning to leave, to pretend as if he had forgotten something and needed to return to his tent, but then he saw Lu's eyes. They froze Lee to the spot.

Lee did not welcome confrontation. At the temple in China, he had taken the time to learn any form any master would teach him. His voracious appetite for knowledge spawned his mastery of kung fu, not any desire to fight, and this mastery prevented confrontation. He had, of course, not shunned the honors that came with his renown back home. He had led a comfortable life. Why had he come here? He'd served his time, he felt, and should have moved up in the company by now. He could not work harder. He moved rocks as best he could; he moved his men as best he could. When would he be recognized?

The *shang-si* stepped forward. Lee had told none but his own men of his experience with George Chan. Obviously, though, word traveled like sparrows through the camp.

Lu spoke first. "We hear your visit failed to achieve our ends in regards to the subsidies." What could Lee tell him without facing further inquisition?

"Mr. Chan has assured us the local merchants will treat us fairly and --"

Lu's somber shaking of his head silenced Lee. A murmur of voices trickled through the gathered workers. Very rarely were they privy to the mild disagreements that sometimes came up between the *shang-si*, so Lee was sure this was something of a novelty. His shoulders slumped.

"What will you have me do?" he asked Lu.

"You will again speak with --"

“Words are not enough!” Finally, Bull Horns had arrived. He pushed his way through the walls of the square and stood, breathing hard, before Lu and Lee. “We must strike, lay down our tools, and force the white men to pay us our due.”

Lee had spoken with disdain of George Chan, even if he didn’t feel it fully in his heart, for his Western way of grooming and his affected speech, but here was an even more insidious means by which the West had infiltrated the minds of the Chinese. Bull Horns was willing to throw out all things he had learned as a child in order to fill his stomach. This disgusted Lee. He could allow a little disrespect in front of his own group of workers, but now Bull Horns had taken it too far.

“I will not tolerate this,” Lee said to Lu, though his eyes followed Bull Horns.

Lu raised his chin and looked down his long, hooked nose at Bull Horns. He was not an old man, but he seemed to bear the weight of many incarnations. The thin mustache he wore now would surely, someday, grow long and white, reaching past his shoulders even.

“Bull Horns,” Lu said. He approached the larger man, walking a circle around him thoughtfully as he spoke. “This is a meeting where we discuss possibilities. You have presented us a possibility, and we thank you for it.”

Bull Horns nodded but did not reply.

“We will, however, postpone that action.”

Lee smiled. No discussion to be had then, despite what Lu would have the men believe.

“With all due respect --” Bull Horns began again.

“Lee, deal with this.”

Bull Horns had offended Lu, and as Bull Horns’ immediate boss, it fell to Lee to correct his behavior. Bull Horns glared at Lee.

“We will not tolerate your disrespect,” Lee told him.

Bull Horns laughed outright. “What will you do, little man?” Bull Horns flexed for the benefit of the gathered crowd. They didn’t seem impressed; most studied with Lee, and though he had not taught them kung fu, they had seen with their own eyes his capabilities. Lee regretted having to make a scene.

Lee finished the fight in only a few beats of a humming bird’s wing. Bull Horns took one lumbering step forward and swung his massive fist. Lee crouched, deflecting the blow with his left forearm. He pivoted at the same time, and dropping to a low horse stance, drove a brutal tiger claw up into Bull Horns’ diaphragm.

He clutched Bull Horns’ arm in his left hand, pulling the larger man off balance. His striking hand then snuck around, grasped the flesh of Bull Horns’ kidneys, and held him there. He could feel the skin beneath his ragged nails ripping.

Bull Horns huffed. Lee knew how the man would feel in this hold, like his insides had liquefied and he might vomit them out at any moment. Lee stretched his arm at an uncomfortable angle.

“Do I need to take this any further?” Lee asked, pressing the arm back against its socket to emphasize his question. Bull Horns grunted; he clearly had not regained his breath. Lee let him go, and he fell to his knees in the dirt. Now Lee worried every upstart in the camp would come to challenge him.

“Now,” Lu began, “you will talk to Mr. Modin yourself this time, not Mr. Chan. You will tell him that subsidies will be extended to the Chinese merchants or we will be paid more or we will strike. The current arrangement is unacceptable.”

Nods of agreement rippled through the gathered workers. So Bull Horns could get what

he wanted in the end. If only he had relied on proper etiquette, Lee would not have had to embarrass him.

“But we will not strike without Master Lee.” This from one of Lee’s own workers. Others, his students, voiced their agreement. He could hear murmured discussions between workers. When had he garnered so much loyalty? He did not know. He felt the burden of their lives upon him.

Lu nodded. “All of us will agree on a course of action when the time comes. First though, Lee will talk to Modin.”

The opportunity came the next day. Mr. Modin made his general examination of progress as Lee worked the new tunnel. Lee had to be careful. He did not want to betray his people, but he did not want to lose his position either. When Mr. Modin entered the tunnel, Mr. Chan and a few foremen in tow, Lee set down the rock he held and approached. He did not feel nervous now but tired, tired of the entire situation. Lu had told him what to say, and Lee had had some trouble finding the right words in English to say it.

“Mr. Modin,” Lee said in English. He bowed slightly.

Mr. Modin’s eyebrows raised as he looked down at Lee. “Chan?” he asked.

The translator stepped forward; he clutched a ledger in his hands, his knuckles white with the force of his grip. “This is Lee Huang-Fu, sir.”

“I know who he is, Chan. I thought you’d dealt with this problem,” Modin’s eyelids were now heavy, half-closed over their orbs as if he had just awakened from a nap.

“I explained to him the arrangements that were made with Feliz and Calloway,” Chan told him.

“So why does this man approach me now?” Modin motioned toward Lee with a foppish flip of his wrist.

“That, sir, I do not know.” Chan glared at Lee.

Lee tilted his head. This was not the same Mr. Chan who had acted so imperiously toward him the day before. Mr. Chan must feel the same way when speaking to Mr. Modin that Lee felt when speaking to Mr. Chan. Interesting.

“Sir,” Lee broke in, looking now directly at Mr. Modin, refusing to let Mr. Chan’s nervousness affect himself. “Mr. Chan say to me the arrangements. These do not seem good to the majority of your workers. What we like, and what is within your power, is the same subsidies for Chinese businessmen from whom we buy our food.”

There, he’d gotten it out. Regardless of what the answer was, he had done as Lu asked.

“You speak English very well, Huang-Fu.”

Lee bowed again then cleared his throat. Lu had also told him, though, to make sure that Mr. Modin understood the repercussions of ignoring the request. “If subsidies refused, or you do not give us modest raise to cover food expenses, your workers...strike.”

Modin did not look surprised. In fact, he raised the corner of his mouth in a smile and turned to look at some of the foremen as if to say, “I told you so.”

“Listen.” Mr. Modin paused, his eyes opened fully, and he looked up at the rock ceiling of the tunnel. “Come see me tomorrow. Three o’clock. I’m sure we can work something out.”

Lee bowed again as the group moved on. He turned back to his rock and lifted it into the cart. He would have good news to share with the other *shang-si*.

At the appointed time, Lee went to the shack Mr. Modin used as his office. Workers had broken

it down, though, and now it sat loaded, waiting, on the top of a train car. Other workers pointed Lee in the direction of a passenger car. Mr. Modin's personal car, he was told. Lee tapped on the door at the side, and Mr. Chan let him in.

Mr. Modin sat at the far end of the car, reclining in a leather chair. Mr. Chan went to a small stool and stood on it. Another man, a tailor, went about taking his measurements and recording them in a small book.

"Lee," Mr. Modin began as he lifted a cigar to his lips and lit it. "I've thought long and hard about our situation, and I think I've come up with a solution."

These words relieved Lee.

"Chan tells me the workers won't strike without agreement from all the bosses."

Who would tell Mr. Chan that? He must have spies.

"That puts your men in a position of power. Now, I'm not going to extend any kind of helping hand to these Chink merchants. That's just bullshit. But Lee, see, you already work *for* me. We already have a relationship, don't we? How would you like to convince your workers that the supplies they can get from Feliz and Calloway are good enough? In return, I think we can set you up with a little trade. Not the same scale as the merchants with whom you now deal, but a few luxuries from the East, a few of your dried and pickled things." Mr. Modin waved his hand in a gesture of disdain. "You'd have the whole of the Southern Pacific to make sure the supplies got through. You and me, we'll just cut out those damned Chinese merchants altogether. What do you say?"

"Why don't you use Mr. Chan for this?" Lee asked.

From his perch on the tailor's stool, Mr. Chan chuckled. "I have other responsibilities."

Lee Huang-Fu considered the offer. He remembered that, though the Buddha had taunted

the Monkey King, he had also freed him. The Monkey King had made a promise to the Buddha to escort a monk to gather sacred scrolls from India. In exchange, the Buddha lifted the rock under which the Monkey King was trapped. It seemed now that Modin lifted a weight from Lee too.

Lee could make a name for himself here, too. He could sell pickled cabbages and duck eggs and dried shrimp. Save some money and finally bring his wife to him, maybe settle in that little town back down the tracks a few miles, San Luis Obispo.

Lee saw his hands, calloused, seamed with dirt. His nails still had some of Bull Horns' flesh beneath them, caked with the rock dust. His *cheongsam* was stained and torn. Lee looked at the tailor as he measured Mr. Chan for a new shirt. Chan's face glowed with superiority. Lee decided that he, too, wanted to feel as Chan must. Lee wanted a new shirt, one without frayed sleeves and stains. He wanted to have a position where he could keep that shirt crisp and clean.

"I respectfully accept your offer," Lee told Modin in English. Modin had finally recognized his hard work. Lee would move up now.

In the back of the train car, from within a cloud of cigar smoke, Mr. Modin chuckled. "We will make you a rich man indeed, Mr. Lee."

Lee caught his reflection in a mirror on the train car wall. *Mr. Lee*. Yes, he could make it fit. He could wear it as he would that new shirt. Mr. Lee smiled; he felt the radiance on his face that must have mirrored Chan's. The tailor stepped away from Chan, scribbling measurements in his pocket book.

Mr. Modin approached from the other side of the train car. As he walked, he adjusted his cuffs and checked the time on his pocket watch. He stopped. "Huang-Fu? Huang? Why don't we just call you John? It sort of sounds the same."

Mr. John Lee started to bow then stopped himself. He thrust a hand forward to Mr. Modin instead. They shook.

“Now then,” Mr. Modin said. “Let’s make sure that strike doesn’t happen.”

Mr. Lee motioned toward the tailor and asked, “And when can we arrange...?”

Mr. Modin chuckled. “All in good time.”

To Wade Alone

1903

Betty Carmichael sat on a wooden rocking chair, especially designed for her small frame, and watched the roustabouts tear down the sideshow tents, the dining tents, the dressing tents. Late evening had fallen over the trampled-flat field, and the time had come to move up the coast to the next date. Still, from beneath the big top on the far side, came the cries of astonishment and peals of laughter that heralded the success of another performance. On the inside of the tent, the audience would not hear the songs of the workers as they and the elephants lowered acres of canvas to the ground. Betty heard them. She listened carefully.

When the audience exited, the city that had stood there when they'd entered the big top will have disappeared, returned to the untilled lot that had existed the day before. Already, the local who supplied horses for the hippodrome exercised his steeds. For another nickel, those wanting to stay longer, and pass a bottle in the evening, and lose a few more coins could find a place on the hastily erected track fence.

Betty sighed. She had never seen the performance within the largest of the tents. With rubes present, she exhibited herself only if they paid, and her size precluded her from a spot behind the curtain. The other performers worried she would fall underfoot, or that one of the horses or elephants would trample her in the dim light. She resented this particularly, since a troop of male clowns, none much larger than herself, had an act during the main performance, and no one ever worried about their getting squished. They had strength in numbers, though, and each a full three inches or more on Betty's thirty-nine.

This time of night, when the star performers held the audience in sway, Betty could sit in

her chair and take in the evening. Here on the edge of the action, she could smell the sea air coming in from the beach. The coast lay only a few miles more to the west. Betty had never seen the ocean either, but the matron of the unwed women's train car had and told her of a vast expanse of foaming gray with waves, the caretaker had assured Betty, that would go clear over the little woman's head. Betty had seen the Mississippi River, but even then, only from the window of her train car. Her parents had never taken her to see Lake Superior, despite the fact they lived so close.

Betty had looked at the route map. The trip the train would take this evening wended its way along trestles, across bays, but they'd reach their inland destination far before dawn. Betty felt the activities of the day weighing on her already; she would sleep through the night. The lost opportunity to witness the darkened waters of the Pacific added to her somber mood.

Another round of cheers erupted from beneath the big top. The Chinese acrobats, a big hit on the West Coast because many Chinese bought entrance to the cheap gallery stands, would probably perform next. Betty knew that much from what the road manager told her. She'd seen them practice but had never watched their entire costumed act. When they'd run through full dress rehearsal, Betty had already taken her seat between the giant and the fat woman in the freaks' tent. The road manager carefully determined the order in which he arranged the display of the freaks, to play up each individual's abnormality. During the show, Betty appeared particularly diminutive when she sat on her rocker, knitted, and chatted with Babs, who weighed in at a remarkable 555 pounds. Babs had the Human Skeleton to her left, and the manager had planned their nuptials as next season's big promotion.

Betty smoothed her skirt and looked down at her tiny hands. The road manager had tried the same thing with Betty and the giant, who sat on Betty's other side in the tent, but the giant, a

true gentleman from Belarus, had refused to marry in a publicity stunt.

“Lez go, lovely.”

Betty raised her eyes, across the thighs, the broad torso, up to the dark, hooded eyes of Long John. Unlike many roustabouts, Long John, a man the color of western earth with slick black hair falling into his eyes, had served many seasons on the tour. He reminded Betty of the Indians in the penny dreadfuls she read as a child. He moved silently, as if he could come up behind her and take off her head without her ever knowing. She did not like Long John; she hated having to rely on him

Each night, he collected Betty, her trunk, and chair and returned her to her bunk on the train. Standing there in the starlight tonight, he'd already, silently, picked up Betty's trunk and had it balanced over one large shoulder. In that trunk, Betty stored all of her belongings: her knitting, the cabinet cards of herself she sold on the side, a few mementos from home. Silhouettes of her parents, a small Bible she'd received at her baptism, a brooch woven from her grandmother's hair.

In only a few more moments, the performers beneath the big top would conclude their routine, and the rubes would start leaving the tent. Betty's time in the open had ended. She stood and turned to walk toward the dark mass of the locomotive on the far side of the field. Steam already billowed in preparation to leave, rising above the train in luminescent clouds.

Betty treated each tentative step carefully over the uneven ground. She knew Long John followed her, trunk over his shoulder and the back of her small rocking chair clutched in one meaty fist.

They stopped at the stair to the unwed women's train car. Betty knew what must come next. She never liked it. She could not easily reach the first step. Every night after a show, Long

John, with a grunt, would lower the trunk and chair to the ground. Then he stepped forward and grabbed Betty's waist with his fingers.

She glanced down. In the dim light now issuing from the train car, she could see his fingers meet at the middle of her waist. She felt the pressure where his thumbs did the same on her back. The grip of his hands encircled her like the metal hoop of a barrel, holding her even more stiffly than the whalebones in her corset.

Betty gritted her teeth, and Long John lifted, in one oddly graceful movement, setting her down on the surface of the rail car. Betty turned down the hall of small berths, found her own, and entered. Long John came in behind her, placed her chair and trunk high on the rack to keep them out of the way, and left without another word. Betty exhaled, happily free of his presence.

The car matron had already lit one small lamp for Betty, and it cast a dim glow through the cabin. Betty's room sat on the side of the train facing away from the circus, so she could not watch the breakdown of the big top. In less than one hour, the workers would finish, and the train would head up north toward Salinas. After Salinas came San Francisco. Betty had heard wonderful things about San Francisco. Entire countries, it seemed, existed within it. China, Italy... They pulled crabs out of the cold water, larger than her head. And of course, Alcatraz, where notorious war prisoners from all over the world served their time. It seemed like an unreal place to her, yet the road manager had assured her she would see others, more amazing, eventually -- New Orleans, New York, Chicago. Even, if the Queen's health improved, London, where they would give a command performance with Betty dressed in the Queen's black. The manager had even promised Betty she could sing for the Queen, something she was not allowed to do in the freaks' tent, despite the fact that the talker used her "voice of an angel" as one of the baits to get people inside. Betty suspected the manager didn't want her to sing because it would

make her a more prominent attraction and he would have to pay her more.

Betty decided to get ready for bed. Sleep could come hard on the train when the chorus girls returned from the last procession in the main tent. Betty, though close to most of them in chronological age, possessed little in common with the willowy dancers clad in their faux oriental chiffons and silks. She worked hard not to envy them for their tallness and perfect symmetry of limb, but it seemed a battle she would eventually lose

Betty removed her boots, looking glumly at their sturdy brown leather. Fancy young girls' boots pinched her chubby feet, so she had to wear the boots of a schoolboy. She unbuttoned her show dress, a piece as good as anything from Paris but made for a child. The hem of it covered her feet, so the manager saw no reason for the added expense of custom shoes. Betty carefully hung the dress from the rack, standing on her tiptoes to do so. She unlaced then unhooked her corset, stepped out of her bloomers and camisole, and put on the chemise already laid out on her tiny bed. She climbed beneath the freshly laundered sheets and quickly nodded off, enjoying the momentary stillness.

It seemed that the giggles of the chorus girls, the shrill whistle of last chance, and the straining and screeching of the wheels breaking the friction hold on the track arrived simultaneously. All familiar, comfortable sounds to Betty, she awoke only to acknowledge the rightness of it. Before long, the chugging and swaying of the train lulled her back to sleep.

The second time Betty woke, the sound of the fire alarm filled the train. Brakes screeched as it ground to a halt. When it finally came to rest, Betty scrambled out of bed and threw on a dressing gown over her nightdress then laced on her boots. She opened the door of her small cabin and looked into the hall. Chorus girls filled it, dressed in scanty silk bloomers and chemises, their hair wrapped up in kerchiefs to keep it set as they slept; Betty smelled no smoke.

“Oh, Miss Betty.” One of the girls threw her hands to her face to express her evident shock at seeing Betty watching everything so calmly. “We really must get you out of here. There’s a fire, you know.” The girl turned and headed for the exit.

“Miss Betty!” The car matron this time. She too stopped and looked down at Betty. She bent at the waist to get to Betty’s eye level, putting her hands on her knees. Her motherly breasts swayed. “Are you afraid, little one? Come on then.”

She wrapped an arm around Betty. Betty, reluctantly, embraced the matron. She could not argue with the older woman. The matron lifted Betty and rested Betty’s head against her shoulder as she would a babe who needed burping. Betty sighed deeply. She had meant to wait for the car to clear out before leaving, so the girls would not trample her in their tizzy. She wished now for the trampling rather than the coddling.

She closed her eyes and thought of the home she would build someday. Low counters so she could fill her own water glass at the tap. Doorknobs only two feet up so she could turn them, Electric lights with switches low enough on the wall so she could use them on her own. All the furniture scaled to her size, with only one chair for a big person, so that visitors would feel out of place in the tiny, delicate house.

The matron set Betty down in a cluster of chorus girls, and they surrounded her like a circle of aspen; their diaphanous underthings flittered in the ocean breeze.

Through the shifting curtain of silk, Betty could see the front of the train stopped on a narrow trestle, nothing but air beneath for a hundred yards. The trestle spanned a small bay, and to the west, gunmetal flecked with white, lay the Pacific Ocean. In the moonlight, Betty could make out the pale cut of a switchback road heading down the side of the cliff where her end of the train sat.

She looked back at the south end of the train, toward the caboose. Smoke billowed out of one of the menagerie cars. Betty could see workers separating the car from the rest of the train. Handlers harnessed elephants to the caboose and towed it and its adjoining cars some feet away from the burning car. On the north end of the train, the engine steamed to life and pulled the bulk of the train to the far side of the trestle. Betty watched as her own car passed over. Now, she smelled burning hair, and over the murmur of chorus girls and the distant surf, she could hear apes screaming, oddly human, from the isolated boxcar. The monkeys, then.

The apes' screaming distracted the chorus girls. They huddled together more tightly as they grasped each other. They, unknowingly, pushed Betty out of the group and behind them. She continued to gaze on the scene silently. A bucket line formed from the tank car, full of water, to the burning car. Pails of water began to move down the line. The contents doused the flames, but more leapt up.

Betty turned away and walked toward the edge of the switchback, a relic, she assumed, of the railroad industry. They must have had to move equipment to the bay below to construct the trestle. Sand and shells littered the path beneath her boots. She smelled salt now over roasting animal flesh. The salt drew her down, down the road to the water, away from the train, away from the chorus girls and car matron. She walked toward the cold Pacific.

Betty rolled the word around in her head. It meant peace, tranquility. Though the sea changed between swell and tide, it appeared forever constant. Mussels and barnacles and limpets always lived on the same place on the same rock. The same kelp drifted in and out, anchored to the seabed by holdfasts, swell after swell. Betty thought of her parents' home in St. Cloud. She'd grown up there, sheltered and protected. They never sent her to school, never brought friends around for her to play with, never even gave her a brother or a sister. She'd horrified her parents

when she'd joined the circus, but at the end of the season, they never scoffed at the money she wired home.

Her parents were barnacles, Betty, a great whale migrating about the wide world on the current of a locomotive. In this, at least, she was big.

The soft swish of sand replaced the crunch of gravel under Betty's feet. She looked down. The sand glowed in the moon, the foam of the waves the only thing brighter. Now salt -- no cheap chorus girl perfume, no horse or elephant sweat, no burning hair -- reached her nose. Salt and kelp and moonlight and the swoosh of the surf directly to the west. Betty walked toward the sound, stopped, removed her boots, and dug her toes into the powdery substrate. She detected tiny imperfections in the sand; she assumed a shell, a shred of dried kelp, a sticky blob of tar. She left her boots, a dark patch on the sand that became progressively indistinguishable from seaweed or drift wood or whale bone.

Betty walked toward the water, holding her peignoir up around her knees. Above, in the distance, she heard the train whistle, but she did not heed it. She kept toward the water. Had they already extinguished the fire? The matron had to count to make sure all were in her train car before they left, but would she notice a missing midget?

Looking up, Betty watched as the train backed up over the trestle. They must have extinguished the fire somehow. She wondered if any of the apes survived. Their cost would surely come out of their handler's salary if they hadn't. He smoked in the car sometimes, or left a lamp burning. Betty shook her head and returned her gaze to the water. Small waves crashed and broke close to shore, while larger ones ruptured farther out, sounding like the muffled applause of the audience under the big top.

She wanted to put her foot in, just to feel the cold against her skin. She wanted to write

home to St. Cloud to tell her parents that one night, when the monkeys burned, she waded in the Pacific, by herself. No Long John with his hands around her waist. No car matron checking on her or chorus girls fawning over her as they would a china doll. Two more steps and the sand became wet beneath her feet. Two more steps and the first live water tripped up and wrapped around her ankles. Betty's feet froze. Cramps crawled up her legs. She stepped out farther, feeling the surge and pull of the waves around her calves. Up above on the bluffs, she heard the train whistle again. If they came looking for her, could they pick her out in the darkness? Would her white dressing gown, floating around her, look like sea foam on a wave? To her knees now. Now thighs. Another step and Betty let her knees fold, and she submerged, her head below the icy water. It roared in her ears. She felt herself lift and sink with the waves as they sped at the sand. Unidentifiable matter swept past her, brushing tendrils of goose bumps across her body. Betty thought of sideshow mermaids in jars of brine and dried shark specimens and the anchors and swallows on the tattooed man.

She found firm ground and stood again, pushing her hair back from her face as she did. Behind her, she heard shouts. She turned and watched bobbing lanterns descending quickly down the switchback and across the beach toward her.

In her distraction, a wave pushed Betty off her feet, and she struggled to stand again. She came up, her mouth full of water. She refused to look at the beach, refused to acknowledge her caretakers as they came for her.

She rose and fell with another wave and another. Her whole body grew numb. Then the cold didn't bother her anymore.

Without warning, hands grasped her waist and hauled her from the ocean.

"There, now," Long John grunted as he carried her at arm's length back to the beach.

What had been waist deep to her only reached the bottom of his knees. The car matron took her shawl from her shoulders and wrapped the shivering Betty up in it before telling Long John to set her down. Another worker stood nearby, holding Betty's boots, and she could just make out the road manager, lifting a lantern, at the foot of the switch back. In its light, he shook his head. Betty had caused a delay; her pay would be docked. He retreated up the road, most likely to make notes in his log.

Betty sighed as she took her boots and laced them up. A schoolboy's boots. She couldn't get high-heeled boots; no one made them small enough. The matron's shawl enveloped her as would a blanket. At least they let her walk back on her own.

A Common Whore

1925

In her left hand, Lynda held the hem of her black crepe skirt and the end of her long string of paste pearls. She didn't want the beads to touch the water; the ocean would strip them of their luster. She knew the salt water would ruin her dress, her only good work one, really, leaving large rings of mineral deposits and causing the hem to shrink and warp. She kept her hand up and away from her body, the pearls forming a suspension bridge from there to her pale, thin neck. In the sky, the gibbous moon hung, its light reflected on the calm ocean. Lynda thought it looked like a cracked pearl in the sky.

Lynda turned; the water swirled about her calves as it rushed out, washing away the lines she had so carefully drawn down the backs of her legs to suggest stocking seams. On the beach, Mr. David Ferragut Lee sat with another one of the girls, Emily. They drank a smuggled bottle of champagne; his shipment had come in that night to Port Harford from Canada. He didn't seem to worry that they might get caught. His father named him after the face on the hundred dollar bill, and D.F Lee carried a sense of entitlement with that name. The opium den he ran in San Luis Obispo, ten miles inland over the low, coastal range, was successful, and he had paid off most of the men who could have threatened his trade.

Emily giggled, her high, adolescent voice floating out across the sand and water. Mr. Lee had favored her with a gift, a high-collared, satin blouse embroidered with chrysanthemums. Lynda watched as Emily put it on over her dress, stood, and modeled it for Mr. Lee. His legitimate business, a small import store stocked with all manner of curiosities from the Orient, provided the trinkets he brought the girls when he visited Miss Evengeline's.

Lynda had heard that, in San Francisco, there was a whole city-within-the-city, full of similar stores and treasures and Chinks. She smiled at the thought. There was only Mr. Lee's in San Luis, along with another market and a few restaurants; there had, years before, been more stores lining Palm Street, enough to call it a Chinatown, but they had all slowly closed as the work in the railroad had left the city.

Another wave rushed in, covering Lynda's feet and reaching to her calves. Farther out, she could hear the breakers and saw their white foam glow in the moonlight.

Mr. Lee treated Miss Evangeline's girls well, even though most of them wouldn't work with him. Lynda didn't mind taking him as a client. He was gentle and funny and always brought her little presents. Tonight, he'd given her a woodcarving of a fat man, his belly bare, holding his hands above his head. He had a huge grin on its face. Mr. Lee had called it a *Buddha*. She loved the tiny man's smile and its bright lacquer finish, and it somehow made her feel better about the things that were wrong in her life.

But Emily's shirt *was* nicer. Maybe she would share.

The water, pulling at her heels as it retreated, numbing Lynda's feet. Even in late summer, the ocean here remained cold. She walked up out of the little waves to the place on the beach where Mr. Lee and Emily sat on one of the house's rough, wool blankets. Lynda watched as, with one purple-nailed finger, Emily coyly traced the red line in its tartan pattern and drank champagne from a tin cup. She batted thick, black lashes and smiled, playing her dimples to advantage. Lynda tried to cover up a sigh. She'd been in this business, in one form or another, for many years, and it always hurt to watch the new girls working to find their niche.

Up and down the beach, small fires burned, each surrounded by a tight enclave of visitors. It seemed thousands of people had invaded Pismo Beach, over from the valley,

Bakersfield and Fresno, for the Harvest Festival in Arroyo Grande, two towns over. Lynda hoped Miss Evangeline would take the girls in the car to see it on Sunday, since they'd all be out going to church anyway.

Lynda dug her toes into the sand as she walked back toward Mr. Lee and Emily. She pushed the top of her foot down, scooped up a pile of sand, and kicked it at nothing. She laughed lightly as she approached, putting on her playful smile and swinging her hips.

Lynda crossed the high tide line. She dropped the hem of her skirt and end of her pearls. The pearls clattered down her front, the long strand reaching past her hips

"I'm gonna head back up to the house," Lynda said. She stopped in front of the blanket and looked down at the other two. "Unless you need me for anything."

"No, go ahead." Mr. Lee's voice was deep and cultured. His father, John Lee, had been someone important in the railroad industry. This Mr. Lee, on his father's fortune, had graduated from Stanford, kept a little Mexican housekeeper named Sonia, and ate fried chicken and potatoes on Sundays. Lynda smiled, bending over to pick up her shoes and the little Buddha statue off the blanket. Lynda felt the deep V of her dress's bodice fell open as she did, revealing her small, unbound breasts for Mr. Lee's benefit. He seemed to take notice, raising a thin eyebrow and cocking his head. Lynda straightened herself and shrugged a single shoulder, beaming all the more before heading up the beach toward the sea wall. Behind her, she could hear Emily laughing at something Mr. Lee must have whispered to her.

"Lynda, wait," Mr. Lee called after her.

Lynda stopped and turned to look over her shoulder at him. He stood and crossed the sand toward her. He'd rolled the cuffs of his tuxedo pants up, and his bow tie hung undone around his neck.

He stopped a few feet away from her. “Can I see you later?” he asked.

Lynda smiled. “Of course. I would, as always, be honored.”

“And maybe Emily as well?” He raised his eyebrows again.

A threesome? Something Lynda had not yet had to do at Miss Evangeline’s. She wasn’t sure if Miss Evangeline would pay her extra for it or if she would have to split the regular fee with Emily.

“I’ll see you later then.” Mr. Lee turned back and nearly skipped to Emily on the blanket.

Lynda took the seawall steps in her bare feet. The wood, worn smooth from a summer’s traffic and fine sand, felt cool. At the top, Lynda bent over and dusted her feet off with the palm of her hand. The only light came from the door of the dance hall and, farther up, the windows of the El Pizmo Hotel. She wondered for a moment why the hotel’s name had a Z when the place was spelled with an S. Lynda slipped on her shoes and headed for the first round spot of light on the street. She walked past the dance hall. A slow tune drifted out. Lynda rubbed the bald head of the Buddha statue with her thumb and thought about going in, to sell a couple of dances, but decided against it. She walked a few more paces and stopped in front of the taffy store window.

In the dim light, the display looked like a child’s perfect dream, all spun sugar and bright colors. Raised plates at different heights held various flavors of taffy and other candies, each wrapped in its own glorious cover of wax paper or foil. Lynda promised herself she would stop by before she went to San Luis again. Caleb would never forgive her if she showed up empty-handed.

Lynda continued up the street, toward the foothills. The El Pizmo Hotel towered to her right as she passed. She turned left down a side street and started away from the town. The mix of gravel, sand, and old clamshells that made up the road’s surface crunched beneath her feet.

The few speakeasies to either side soon gave way to a field of wild mustard, its bright yellow flowers glowing in the moonlight.

Up ahead, nestled in a grove of brooding eucalyptus, Lynda saw the house. Bright light poured out the front windows on the first floor of the wood frame Victorian, a painted lady full of painted ladies. Red chiffon curtains dimmed the light from the second-story windows. On the broad porch, she could make out a few men in the rocking chairs, smoking cigars or opium. Whenever Mr. Lee came to visit, he made sure the whole house welcomed him by bringing gifts for men and girls alike.

Lynda slowed her steps, unsure she wanted to return to the house yet. If she did, she would have to work; if she stayed away, she could pretend later that she had remained with Mr. Lee and Emily at the beach. She didn't want to end the night with some stinking man on top of her. Yet where else could she go? Lynda thought about turning back to the dance hall or to one of the speakeasies, but she decided against it. The revenue men had made a raid recently, and the barkeeps were a little gun-shy.

The cries of killdeer and gulls sounded in the distance, and Lynda could hear the rumble of the late-evening surf as it picked up. A salty breeze ruffled the hem of her dress. As she drew closer to the house, music from the trio Miss Evangeline hired drifted out across the front yard.

Lynda stopped at the white picket gate and took a breath. The fragrance of late-blooming, Cecil Bruner roses, Miss Evangeline's pride, filled Lynda's nose, all lemon and pepper. The bright house, the flowers, even the gate... All created a scene of perfect domesticity, a carefully skilled pretense of Miss Evangeline's.

Lynda placed her hand, heavy and reluctant, on the latch of the gate, then pushed through, up the gravel path and onto the front porch steps. Here, the music drowned out the

sound of the birds and the sea. The smell of opium and tobacco smoke overwhelmed the salt air and roses. A board creaked beneath her foot as she reached for the screen door.

“Do I know you?” a voice asked. Lynda turned her head slowly and looked at the man she assumed had spoken. He exhaled a thick cloud of pungent smoke and lowered his pipe. He had a Panama hat drawn down over his eyes, but he lifted his head to peer at her from beneath its brim. Lynda’s heart stopped. She knew his face; it was not welcome on this porch.

“Sir?” Lynda replied. She tried to sound calm, but she feared her voice betrayed her sudden panic.

“I said, ‘Do I know you?’ girl.” He squinted and tilted his head.

Lynda saw that the sun had darkened his skin, and his eyes crinkled with crow’s feet. She knew him to be a man accustomed to standing in the fields but only as an overseer. He had never worked a day in his life. “You are familiar to me, girl, but I don’t know why. Where you from?” His voice was demanding. The other men on their porch lowered their smokes and looked at him and at Lynda.

“San Luis Obispo, sir. Born and raised.” Mr. Ethridge, Lynda remembered.

“Is that so?” he asked. He raised his pipe to the candle, placed carefully on the table at arm’s reach. He held the metal bowl over the flame until the opium smoked, and then he drew a long breath through the thin stem. “I’m out with the family, from Bakersfield. Thought I’d take a night to entertain myself while the wife entertains the children.”

“Quite, sir.” Lynda finally opened the screen door. “If you’ll excuse me.”

“I don’t know that I’m done talking to you, girl.” He exhaled finally. “You sure bear a resemblance to an associate’s --” He stopped, shook his head, and smiled. “Ah, well, never mind. Can I call on you later, should I fancy entertaining?”

“Uh...of course, sir. Your custom would be welcomed.” Lynda finally slipped into the house, her heart beating ragged in her chest. Men and whores crowded the sitting room of the house. Miss Evangeline forced the men to smoke outside, so the air was refreshingly clean. Lynda took a deep breath. Miss Evangeline saw her and smiled. The madam moved from her place behind the small, ornate bar in the corner and crossed to Lynda.

“There you are, dear,” Evangeline said. She took Lynda by the hand and led her back to the bar. “I take it Mr. Lee was happy with our Emily?”

Lynda nodded.

“Good. I don’t care what color his skin is, so long as his cash is green.” Evangeline poured out two measures of soda water and bitters into two clean glasses. She pushed one over to Lynda. “I’ve had a couple boys up from Grover City asking after you, child. Says you done them right last time.” Miss Evangeline paused. “You look shaken.” She sipped her drink and raised a hand to her smooth, finger-waved hair. “Something happen at the beach?”

Lynda shook her head. She spoke in a voice just audible over the baritone ukulele, cornet, and snare/ bass kit in the far corner. “The man out on the porch.” Lynda stopped, not sure how to continue. Miss Evangeline knew something of her past, but not everything. “He is an associate of my husband. He thinks he knows me.”

“And you don’t want your man to find you?”

“You know that, ma’am.” Lynda lowered her eyes. “I’m more worried about Caleb.”

Miss Evangeline raised an eyebrow in question.

“He’s not my... I mean, he’s my stepson.”

“You didn’t tell me you had a son.” Evangeline’s voice was low, thoughtful.

“He’s with my mother in San Luis.”

“So you kidnapped a boy from his father?”

Lynda nodded slowly, reluctant to admit that, yes, that’s exactly what she had done.

“This boy knows what you do?”

“No, ma’am.” Lynda took a deep breath; her gaze focused on the full glass in front of her. In her right hand, she still clutched the Buddha. With her left hand, she reached out and lifted the crystal tumbler to her lips, took a gulp of the drink, and swallowed. She felt a little better as the bitters worked in her stomach.

“He’s sure going to find out if your man comes looking for you.” Miss Evangeline took a sip of her own drink. “That’s what you’re afraid of?”

“He’ll take Caleb back to Bakersfield. I won’t see him.”

“Your man beat you, right?” Miss Evangeline asked. She evidently knew why things were the way they were, why some girls came knocking on her door.

Lynda nodded again.

“Your man beat the boy?”

“No, ma’am. Just me, for being the whore he married.” Lynda tried for a smile but knew she failed miserably. “Caleb misses his father, but I don’t want them together. Buck doesn’t know how to treat a lady, and he’ll just pass on all those bad habits --”

“A boy needs his daddy, Lynda, and you aren’t even his mother.” Evangeline seemed to mull over her own words.

“I’m the closest thing he remembers to a mother.” Lynda tried to meet the other woman’s eyes, but couldn’t manage it. Instead, she glanced at herself in the mirror behind the bar. What she saw, looking back, wasn’t anything more than a common whore. Heavy eyeliner, rouge, dark lipstick. A painted lady, not a mother. Lynda lowered her gaze to her drink again and sighed.

“You go on up to your room,” Evangeline said. “I’ll make sure that man doesn’t bother you, but you need to think about what you done. Copasetic?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Lynda left her glass and headed for the stairs, taking them two at a time in her eagerness to get to the shelter of her room. She walked down the narrow hall to her chamber, then pushed open the door and went inside.

The walls were plain white in stark contrast to the livid, flocked purples and reds in the rest of house. A thin cotton drape billowed at her open window. Lynda crossed the few feet, sat down on the edge of her bed, and looked out. As the branches of the eucalyptus parted and swayed in the breeze, Lynda saw brief glimpses of the moonlight on the ocean.

She glanced down at the Buddha in her hand, lying in the open palm at her lap. Lynda had tacked, to the wall, an old, painted board strawberry crate. The wooden divider down the middle served as a shelf. Little knickknacks and mementoes lined the three shelves formed by the ends of the box and the divider, the only things she had taken with her when she fled. Lynda stood and placed the small statue on the middle shelf. Next to it, in a small porcelain box decorated with transfers of violets, Lynda kept her wedding ring. Her fingers lingered over the statue. She walked to the window and looked out again.

Mr. Etheridge relieved himself against one of the eucalyptus trees below. Lynda heard the splatter as the liquid hit the papery bark. Etheridge stood with his back to her, but she recognized him by his hat and the opium pipe sticking out of his back pocket. When it seemed he was done, he turned around, buttoning his fly. His eyes somehow drifted up to her window, and he looked at her, cocking his head. Lynda ducked aside, pulling away from the window and using the wall to shield her. Lynda could tell he had remembered. She shut her eyes tight, willing the man away.

“Why, I do believe it *is* Mrs. Buck Ables,” Etheridge said, his voice just loud enough for Lynda to hear.

She collapsed onto the bed, a sob catching in her throat.

“Thought you’d gone up to Yosemite for the season. Didn’t recognize you with that hairstyle.” Etheridge’s voice seemed closer, like he stood directly beneath her window. “And no better than a common whore. My wife always said that’s what you were, up and marrying Buck like that.”

Had they known about Lost Ranch? Or was it just that she had come out of nowhere as far as they were concerned?

“That ain’t no kind of woman to raise Ella Mae’s child, she said.” He chuckled low then belched then laughed again.

Lynda waited for more taunting words, but nothing else came from below her window. She stood and looked out. The moonlit yard was empty, but she fancied she could hear Etheridge’s laughter on the breeze.

The madam who ran the Lost Ranch Cathouse hadn’t spent the kind of time or money on her place that Miss Evangeline did. Her clientele had not been as discriminating. The place had possessed a single level, a bar at the front and a dark, narrow hallway with rooms, not much more than closets, really, leading off both sides. They had no indoor plumbing, and the girls always had to take cold baths. In winter, being so close to the Sierra Nevada, ice sometimes formed on the top of the bathwater. The ranch catered to cowboys, field hands, and the rare hunter or trapper down out of the mountains.

Lynda couldn’t remember exactly how she’d ended up there, in one of those little rooms.

She did remember a morphine binge for which she could not pay, a bumpy ride tied and blindfolded, and then a sweaty few weeks as the addiction worked itself out of her body. When she raised herself from her stupor, she had become an employee of Lost Ranch. She took to the life easily enough. Thoughts of her mother's home gave her hope, and at least she had the drugs out of her system.

Several months after she had arrived, paid off the morphine debt for which she'd been put to work, and started saving for a train ticket back to San Luis, Buck came in. No one at the cathouse knew him, but he went right for Lynda. He said he'd taken to her long, black hair and big black eyes. That first night, he paid Lynda just to hold him as he cried. His wife had died and left him with a son. He had no idea what to do with the child, barely weaned.

Buck visited Lynda several more nights. On the fifth night in a month, drunken and emotional, he made her a proposition.

"Be my wife," he said, his words slurred.

The other whores in the barroom laughed. Lynda knew they'd all heard that line from a man too deep in his cups and thinking with his dick.

"No, seriously." Buck slammed his glass down on the bar. "My boy needs a mother. I can give you a better life than this shithole. A good and proper life."

Lynda thought about the offer. She felt like one of the paper boats she used to send down San Luis Creek as a child. She had no control, tossed back and forth by the minute rapids. Here, though, had arisen a smooth current, a path possibly straight and true. She could be a mother. She'd had a good enough one as an example. She realized there was benefit to be had in sleeping with one stranger every night instead of different ones. And any place had to be better to live in than Lost Ranch.

“You can get hot water for a bath?” Lynda asked.

Buck nodded.

“Then I’ll go with you,” Lynda told him. She gathered her few belongings and left that night. The next day, the justice of the peace in Bakersfield joined them in civil matrimony, and Buck took her home to his ranch. Before allowing her to cross the threshold of the house, he grabbed her wrists and looked deep into her eyes. Lynda swallowed.

“I hope to only have to tell you this once,” he said. “Don’t cross me. This is *my* home. I brought you here, and I can put you right back at the Lost Ranch, and don’t think anyone will ever come looking for you again.”

His grip hurt her wrists.

In the few years they were together, Lynda tried desperately to heed his warning, but she never seemed to get it right. She was never good enough, never did it the right way, never did it the way Ella Mae did. And soon, Buck’s criticisms manifested in physical outbursts. A slap there, a black eye here, a bruised rib...

After Caleb had witnessed one of the beatings, she drew the line. She couldn’t tell Buck she had, so she devised a plan. Many wives took their children to Yosemite for the summer, escaping the heat of the valley. They stayed in tent cabins, wood cabins, or the Wawona Hotel for the summer. They had movies and a dance hall and a pool at Camp Curry, and Buck would think nothing of his wife vacationing there. But Lynda had no intention of going.

“Buck,” she told him one night, “I’m thinking of taking Caleb to Yosemite for the season. Swimming, hiking... It would be good for the boy. Get him out of your hair.”

Buck shuffled through invoices on his desk, clearly not paying attention.

“Buck?”

“Yes, of course,” he had said finally. As long as he had thought she was summering in Yosemite, she would have time to figure out what to do.

Mr. Etheridge was right, though she hated to admit it to herself. She should never have tried to fill Caleb’s mother’s shoes. Lynda thought she protected Caleb from Buck, but now she wasn’t sure. Would it be better for him to grow up knowing his stepmother was a whore or growing up thinking it was okay to hit girls? But what if, when Caleb could stand on his own, Buck decided to bully him, too? Miss Evangeline had told her a boy needs his daddy...

There was no telling what Buck would do to her when he found her.

Lynda heard a soft tap on the door of her room. She held her breath. What if Mr. Etheridge had come to drag her back to Bakersfield? She would be shamed in front of everyone. She had promised Buck, when they married, that she would stop doing this kind of thing; he’d believed her. If he found out she’d fallen into old habits, he would literally kill her, but only after he slapped her around for a long while.

“Miss Lynda?” Mr. Lee’s voice, soft and even-tempered. “Are you there?”

Lynda could not escape her work. She stood and walked to the door. Before opening it, she smoothed a hand over her hair, her dress.

She turned the knob.

Mr. Lee stood there, a fan of bills in his hand. “I hope you haven’t been otherwise engaged, my dear. Emily got a little too tipsy.”

Lynda forced a smile and stepped aside, allowing him to enter. Mr. Lee folded the money and put it in his pants’ pocket.

“What’s the matter? You seem a little preoccupied.” Mr. Lee shrugged off his jacket. He

closed the door and hung the jacket on the hook. He sat down on the bed and patted its surface. “Come. Sit.” He grinned. “Tell Papa Lee what’s wrong.”

Lynda kept to the bare minimum; a man from her past had recognized her, and it put her ill at ease.

“Well there are few things that can’t be put right with a little cash.” Mr. Lee pulled the bills out of his pocket. “What’s the price of *your* sorrow, Miss Lynda?” He started peeling off bills.

Lynda thought for a moment.

She named a price.

Saturday proved a beautiful day, the fog burning off early and the sun warm. Lynda kept an old stocking with runs in it under her mattress; there, she stored her money, including what she’d earned from Mr. Lee the night before. After dressing in a calico dress that had traveled with her from the valley, she took out a few dollars and left the house before most of the other girls were even at their coffee. She walked back down the shell road to the town, smelling the mustard and hearing the gulls. She was in a very different frame of mind than the last time she had walked this road. Before, she’d thought to spend Sunday at the festival, watching the afternoon parade and seeing who had won first prize for her preserves or cakes. Lynda’s heart sat low in her gut, pulling her down with its weight. Now, Sunday she would have to run.

Lynda went to the edge of the seawall and looked down at the beach, crowded with bathers who had come down from their rented tents at the El Pizmo Hotel. She watched children playing in the waves and mothers sitting in the shade of broad umbrellas. A band played at the dance hall on the bluffs, the brass shouting out from the dark doorway. Lynda headed next door

to the taffy shop. The small bell tinkled as she entered.

“Can I help you?” the saleslady asked.

“I want to buy some sweets, for my son,” Lynda told her.

“You’re one of Miss Evangeline’s girls, aren’t you?” The woman proffered a wax-paper-wrapped peppermint taffy over the counter to Lynda. Lynda took it tentatively as she nodded. She unwrapped the sweet and placed it in her mouth; she felt a small smile touch her lips.

“What would you like?” The woman smiled in return, a look of genuine levity and human interest on her face.

Lynda was not asked to leave nor was she glared at. Surprised by the woman’s reaction, Lynda placed an order, something of everything for the boy.

The saleslady packed all the little sugar jewels in bright blue boxes secured with ribbons.

Next, Lynda walked up the street to use the phone at the El Pizmo Hotel. She called the store over which her mother lived. The clerk there had grown used to this interaction and fetched Lynda’s mother down from her rooms.

“Mama?” Lynda asked, her head leaning in toward the transmitter of the payphone. Around her, in the lobby of the El Pizmo Hotel, people in bathing costumes headed toward their rooms.

“Put that down, boy!” Margaret Calloway’s voice was directed to someone else in the store at her end of the line. Obviously Caleb. “What is it, Lynda?” She sounded mildly flustered.

“I need to... Can I come to dinner tomorrow?”

“Of course. I’m making chop suey. Caleb loves it. Here, boy, talk to your mother.”

“Mom?”

Lynda sighed; he’d taken to calling her that so easily. “Hey, sweetie. Are you being good

for your *abuelita*?”

“You know she’s not really my grandma,” Caleb reminded her.

“Yes, I know.”

“I’m going to Julio Ramirez’s birthday.”

“I have not said yes yet,” Margaret told Caleb, her voice faint on the other end of the line.

“That’s nice,” Lynda said. “I’m going to come see you tomorrow, for dinner.”

“It’s not going to be until after the party, is it?” Caleb sounded worried.

“I’ll come on the train.”

“All right then. Mom?”

“Yes?”

“When are we going home? I miss Pop, and school’s going to start soon.”

Lynda couldn’t answer. She swallowed hard. “I love you, Caleb.”

She hung up the receiver. Lynda took her boxes of candy and went back to the house. She went in through the kitchen door; the room was astir with life. Ladies, reviving after the previous evenings toils, lounged in flannel housecoats, their hair armored in pins to create the popular finger-waves. With faces scrubbed clean, devoid of their customary kohl and lipstick, the girls seemed so young and fresh, chatting with one another as they sipped from large mugs of black coffee and nibbled at dry toast. When Lynda was younger, before her marriage, she had enjoyed this camaraderie at Lost Ranch, one of the benefits. Now, however, she felt she had too many secrets to join their sisterhood. Life had tainted her. Lynda did not tarry with her housemates, but nodded in-return greetings and climbed the back stairs to her room. She placed the boxes on the center of her bed and sat next to them. The grief of the decision she had to make was a palpable presence in the room. It sat with her there, breathing her air, suffocating her.

She savored the flavor of the peppermint taffy still lingering in her mouth. It reminded her that she would have to eat eventually, but her stomach felt as if it were filled with wet beach sand, and she wasn't sure if she could keep down any food.

As much as she denied it, she secretly wished Buck would come not just for Caleb, but for her as well. She knew, though, that she'd lost that opportunity the moment she had set foot in this house. Buck had promised her another life, and she had rejected this trade. Now, all she could hope for if he caught her was that the beating he would give her wouldn't end her life.

Then again, maybe an end to all this wouldn't be so bad.

The next morning, Lynda filed into the Baptist church with the other girls and Miss Evangeline. They took their normal pew toward the back and sat waiting, each girl's white-gloved hands folded over her own copy of the Bible. Miss Evangeline's generous gifts to the minister ensured the congregation's warm welcome as they all exchanged good mornings.

Then Lynda saw him. Mr. Etheridge, next to him his wife and children. His eyes turned and met hers, and his face pinched up into a scowl. He nudged his wife, motioned for her to turn, and then pointed directly at Lynda. The other woman's eyes grew wide as her husband leaned in and whispered something in her ear.

Lynda pursed her lips. Mrs. Etheridge must have been too shocked or disgusted to think to ask her husband how he had come across the knowledge of Lynda's current situation; maybe it was enough that she was sitting with Miss Evangeline and the other girls. The Etheridges whispered back and forth fiercely; Lynda knew they were discussing their Christian duty to report her whereabouts to her estranged husband. Lynda smiled grimly, her mind already made up, then looked down at her hands, folded over her Bible. The morning's sermon was dull and

gave no further insight to Lynda in regards to her situation. Afterwards, Miss Evangeline dropped her off at the train depot before taking the other girls to the harvest festival.

Lynda waited for the train, dressed in her modest Sunday best, clutching nervously at the boxes of candy she had for Caleb. Placed on the ground by her feet, Lynda had her suitcase. Miss Evangeline had asked about it, and Lynda had told her that she was just taking some things to store at her mother's. She had left a note for Miss Evangeline, confessing the truth and apologizing for leaving her employ so soon.

People leaving the coast for home crowded the platform. As Lynda waited, she reached into her coat pocket and ran her finger across the smooth belly of the small Buddha statue she had stowed there. It seemed to bring her some peace.

The Etheridges arrived. Mrs. Etheridge held her train case close to her bosom, like a shield, and stepped through the crowd, deliberately, toward Lynda. Mrs. Etheridge stopped and tilted her chin away from her chest, glaring at Lynda down her nose. Lynda looked up from her place on the bench. She knew what to expect and steeled herself with a deep breath.

Mrs. Etheridge stood there, eyes narrowed. Her voice came out in a hiss. "You lying whore. You had *no right* to take that man's son from him." Mrs. Etheridge turned to go back through the crowd to her husband, thought better of it, twisted her head around on her neck, and spat at Lynda's feet. "You're fortunate *I* am a lady, *Mrs. Ables*, or I'd tell you what I really think."

Lynda sucked in a breath. Dozens of comebacks flounced through her head. But she could get nothing out.

Mrs. Etheridge retreated. Mr. Etheridge, across the platform, pulled his wife close to him and seemed to comfort her. Their two children cast wicked glares at Lynda.

Lynda looked at the glob of spittle, inches from the toe of her shoe. It was brown with coffee and tobacco. *Dirty Bakersfield woman and her dirty habits*. Miss Evangeline didn't cotton to her girls chewing tobacco; Lynda reminded herself that she wasn't one of Miss Evangeline's girls anymore.

Lynda sighed, shook her head, and checked her ticket. The train pulled in. She climbed aboard and took her seat, trying desperately not to draw attention to herself.

The ride to San Luis was blessedly short. Lynda got off the train and walked the few blocks to the small apartment in which her mother lived. It was situated over a small market on one of the main streets, near the old Spanish mission. On the second floor and in the back of the building, the only window looked down onto a cold, dark square of San Luis Creek, emerging from beneath one building and quickly flowing beneath the next. The setting always gave a feeling of cold and damp to the flat, but Margaret Calloway had fought valiantly to keep those feelings out of the house, keeping them at bay with warm food and smiles.

Lynda's heart felt lighter as she recalled her childhood in the small rooms, and threw open the front door, hoping to be greeted by the sound of Caleb's feet running across the wood-floor to greet her, but the house was silent. She set her suitcase and candy down next to the door.

"Mama?" Lynda said.

"Back here!" came Margaret's voice from the kitchen. Lynda walked through the informal sitting room, which also served as the dining room and Caleb's bedroom, and into the kitchen with the one window looking out over the creek.

Lynda looked at her mother. If Margaret Calloway had been born a hundred years earlier, she would have been called Doña Margarita Feliz, her father would have owned a rancho, and she would have worn the best dresses imported each fall from Madrid. As it was, her ancestors

had lost their land in the Salinas Valley to the American government in the 1860's, and their fortunes had slowly declined ever since. Margaret had married a good, hard-working Irishman who gave her Lynda and enough of a pension to afford this flat before he died blasting tunnels for the railroad.

Margaret's dark hair, shot through with silver, was pulled back and pinned in place with an old tortoise shell comb. She methodically chopped vegetables with a chipped but well-loved cleaver. Lynda hugged her mother quickly from behind, resting her chin on the older woman's shoulder and looking down at the strange assortment of greenery on the counter. Then she sat on a nearby stool.

Lynda glanced out the window to the moss-covered wall opposite their own. Another window, dark and cheerless, looked back at her. Lynda had always wondered if their own window, despite the joy that had been in the house, always looked just as miserable to whoever was looking at them from the other window. Lynda shook her head and sighed.

"¿*Que pasa, mija?*" Margaret hazarded a sideways glance at Lynda, concern on her face. Coming for Sunday dinner was not a rare occurrence, but Margaret seemed to be able to tell when something else was going on.

"There was a man at the house. He knows Buck. Mr. Etheridge and his wife are going to tell Buck that I had not gone to Yosemite for the season, and then Buck will come for me, and he'll kill me if I don't give him back Caleb."

Margaret kept chopping her cabbage and onions, but her head began to nod up and down rhythmically to the sound of her knife. Lynda could tell her mother was thinking.

"I could have gone back to work, to take care of you and Caleb," Margaret said. After her husband's death, Margaret had taught school. "Then, at least, you wouldn't have been disgraced

like this again.”

Lynda had told her mother about the Lost Ranch. “You’re too old for working,” Lynda told her. She had planned to enroll Caleb at the Catholic school in the fall and needed the tuition money. It wasn’t money that Margaret could have earned at any legitimate position given her age. And, well, Lynda could never get *any* legitimate position. They sat in silence for a while.

“Are you going to run again, *mija*?” Margaret finally asked.

Lynda sighed, steeled herself, and nodded. “But I’m not taking Caleb.”

Margaret set down her knife and turned to Lynda. “Caleb is a sensitive boy; I don’t want him raised by that thug you married.”

“That thug is his father, and I don’t really have any rights to the boy as it is.” It hurt to admit.

“Caleb’ll not turn out any better than Buck. What happens when his daddy gives him a shiner for talking back? Where you gonna be when that happens?”

The two women heard the front door crash open, slamming against the wall as it was flung away on its hinges. Their conversation halted.

“Mom! Mom! Mom!” Caleb careened into the kitchen, dropping a small paper kite and a toy wooden boat on the floor as he leapt toward the stool on which Lynda sat. She caught him and pulled him into her lap.

“Hey, kid,” Lynda said, wrapping her arms around her stepson and holding him tight. She dug her chin into the top of his head. He squirmed beneath the pressure, pulled his head out and away, then looked up at her.

“I had fun at the party,” he told her. “They made ice cream. I ate enough to get a tummy ache, and I threw up, so they sent me home. I ran the whole way ‘cause I knew you’d be here.”

“Oh,” Lynda replied, looking over the boy to her mother, “then you probably don’t want the candy I brought you from Pismo.”

“Where is it?” Caleb asked. He jumped down off his seat and ran into back to the front door; Lynda hadn’t even answered. He returned to the kitchen with the boxes and set them on the kitchen table. Lynda watched as Margaret snaked the prize away from him and stowed it on a high shelf before he could even untie one of the bows.

“Not until after supper,” Margaret told him.

“Mom, I saw your bag by the door. Are we going home? I miss Pop. I can pack my stuff if you want me to. I’m good at it.”

“No, we’re not going home. That’s just some stuff I’m leaving here for a while.”

“When *are* we going to go home? I want to see Pop.”

Lynda had fled at the beginning of the summer, as the picking season began. Even if he’d found out the truth, Buck would have been too wrapped up in the operations of the ranch to bother coming after her right away; he set clear priorities. But now, as fall approached, the crops harvested and the livestock auctioned, he would have no problem leaving the care of his holdings to his foreman for a few days and coming into San Luis Obispo County to look for his son.

“Caleb, come here,” Lynda instructed.

Caleb crossed the few feet from the table to his mother and climbed up into her lap again.

“Your daddy is going to come get you any day now, and you are going to go back home with him for awhile.”

“And you’re going to come with me, right?”

Lynda struggled to find the words to tell her stepson exactly what was happening. She thought about telling him the truth. *Sorry, kid. Now that the Etheridges have gone back to*

Bakersfield and told your daddy your momma's whoring again, there isn't going to be any kind of fairy tale reconciliation between us. The best your mom can hope for is a beating and keeping her life. The worst, well, don't worry so much about that.

"I've got to stay around here, Caleb, take care of my mama."

"But Maggie takes care of me, so she can probably take care of herself." Maggie was the closed he'd come to any kind of endearment for Margaret. "She doesn't need you around. Pop probably needs you more. He can't even make his own coffee."

Margaret and Lynda both smiled.

Lynda played games with Caleb as Margaret finished cooking dinner. They ate, telling little stories and laughing freely. Afterwards, Margaret brought down the boxes of candy and everyone had a piece.

When it was dark, Lynda tucked Caleb in bed, pressing the quilt tight around his neck. She kissed him on the forehead.

Oh, I made a terrible mistake, thought Lynda. Not only a whore, but a kidnapper as well. She wondered if Caleb would remember her when he grew up. She doubted it. Buck would most likely bring home another woman as soon as he got a divorce decree. She should never have involved Caleb in this. She would have been safer on her own, but she worried about him, had grown attached to him over the years. She hoped he grew up to be a strong, moral young man, one who didn't frequent whorehouses.

With a final look, she turned to her mother. She whispered a quick goodbye, refusing to discuss her decision any further.

"I've got to leave tonight. The Etheridges will be back in Bakersfield by tonight. Buck will come soon. Lie to him if you have to. Say I dropped the boy and left him weeks ago, that

you didn't know how to contact him. Tell Buck you don't know where I am. I'll call you when I find a position."

Lynda picked up her case and walked back to the train station. She got her ticket and waited for the red-eye. It pulled in, cloaked in a cloud of steam and coal smoke. Lynda was tired and wanted nothing more than to go back to her mother's house and sleep or even go back to her little room at Miss Evangeline's. She climbed up into the northbound train, handed her case over to a porter, and took a seat by the window. Her hand slipped into her coat pocket again, and she took out the small Buddha statue.

She held it in her sweaty palm. She let the calmness seep into her again. She thought of Mr. Lee; she owed him. Not money -- she'd earned that -- but something. She would write him a letter thanking him when she got to San Francisco.

The ticket collector came around. "Where you headed?" he asked, using his hand-held ticket punch to tip the brim of his cap up. He eyed Lynda in the dimmed lights of the car and gave her a lopsided grin.

"San Francisco," she replied, looking up from the Buddha to the ticket agent. He was young, cute in an awkward way.

"Nice city. Ever been there?"

Lynda shook her head.

"Lots of different people, from all over, all those ships coming and going," he told her.

"Why you headed there?"

"I just lost my son," she replied, then looked back down at her Buddha.

"Oh, well."

The agent moved away. The train jerked forward, the sound of the locomotive thrumming

through the cars. San Francisco seemed like a place where a woman of Lynda's developing talents could make a living, save up a nest egg, and maybe find a lawyer to get a real divorce. It was a place of new beginnings. The City, where no one could possibly know her or find her.

Internment

1945

1990

“You want another beer, Eddie?” I asked, standing and stretching. We sat on the porch of my trailer, watching the sunset over the Pacific. Through the open door of my trailer, I half-listened to the US Open on the television. Pete Sampras played, but my money was on Andre Agassi; he was a lot cuter, even to an old lady like me.

“Yeah, sure,” he said. He’d already lined up several empties on the porch railing. “But I got to piss first.”

“Again?” I asked. It had to be, like, the fifth time since we’d started drinking.

“What can I say, Glory? I’m an old man.”

I laughed. I liked it when he called me by my name, shortened like that. It made me feel younger than my sixty-one years. We both went inside; I headed for the fridge and Eddie for the john. When he came back out, I handed him another beer, and we returned to our seats on the porch.

The sun turned the sky rosy. I looked at Eddie. He’d been a good friend to me since my husband died, leaving me this trailer park in the middle of some useless farmland. Neither of us had anybody else it seemed. I had my brother, sure, but he lived in San Jose practicing agriculture law, and he and his wife rarely made the trip down to Oxnard. Eddie’d mentioned a nephew who wanted to get into “the business” and planned on moving out here after college, but in all the beers we’d shared on this porch, he’d never mentioned anyone else. He didn’t really

talk about much of anything, really. I knew he used to be in a band or something.

“What’s up with that?” Eddie asked, pointing to a mail truck that pulled up in front of my trailer. “Kinda late, ain’t it?”

A mail carrier exited, holding one large envelope. He climbed the couple of steps to my porch.

“Gloria Nakamura?” he asked.

“That’s me,” I replied.

“Sure ain’t me,” Eddie said.

The mail carrier looked at Eddie, then back at me. “This is for you.” He handed me the large envelope, had me sign a receipt, and then left.

“What is it?” Eddie asked.

I had a sneaking suspicion but shrugged for his benefit. The return address was 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. I ripped open the envelope. Inside I found two pieces of paper: a check for twenty thousand dollars and a letter. I scanned the letter. *A monetary sum and words alone cannot restore lost years...rectify injustices...stand for justice...best wishes for the future...Sincerely, George Bush.*

I finally answered Eddie’s question. “A letter of apology and restitution.”

“For what?”

This second question took me back forty-five years and a hundred miles to the north.

1945

Life in the camp had been hard. First, they took all we had. Then, for three years, they fed

us on pickled liver, canned goulash, boiled potatoes...food not suited to our taste. And now, now it had come to an end. The enemy -- whose face so closely resembled our own -- had surrendered two months before, and we were free.

When we'd arrived with a suitcase each, the guards had split us up into dormitories and handed me a canvas sack to stuff with straw for a mattress. I kept looking for a tennis court, a flat brick wall, anywhere to practice. My racket had been one of the few things I'd brought, and I'd hoped and prayed that I wouldn't be locked up so long that I would lose my standing in the local tournaments. But the ground was all loose dust and sand, the walls all irregular clapboard, and tennis balls were not something the guards furnished for us.

Now I stood at the edge of the yard, waiting for my family. I wondered what it would take to get used to the outside world again. I feared how much had changed. What would we be going back to? We'd seen some newspapers and magazines, but of course none of them told us which of the little shops in our town still operated -- the hamburger joint, the sporting goods store -- or who my high school math teacher would be.

Several buses rumbled and spewed smoke in the clearing. I followed my family -- dad Earl, mom Pam, and brother Michael -- from one to the next, reading the signs, trying to figure out which bus ours. Finally, Dad pointed to one. Someone had scrawled in pencil, on a piece of newsprint taped to the inside of the bus window, "Lompoc, Santa Maria, Arroyo Grande, San Luis Obispo, Paso Robles."

"That's got to be it," Dad said. He took our four duffle bags and placed them in the luggage hold.

Arroyo Grande. These words seemed so foreign now, after spending so long around people speaking only English and Japanese. I had known a little Spanish before, but would I

remember? *Ir...voy, vas, va, vamos, van. Voy a Arroyo Grande. Voy a mi casa.* I smiled.

I hefted my surplus rucksack onto my shoulder and climbed the stairs after my dad. Before entering, I looked at the other buses. Friends I'd lived with for three years now boarded them. I knew I would never see many of them again, would never have known them if they hadn't been thrown in here with me.

Abby Sato caught my eye, dropped her bag by the door of her own bus, and ran across the lot to me. We'd said our tearful goodbyes last night, but she had been my bunkmate in the girls' dorm, and we'd spent many a night whispering adolescent secrets to each other.

I dropped my own bag and took a few steps to meet her. We hugged. Tears again filled her eyes. I had never had a friend as close as Abby, and I doubted I ever would. She lived in Los Angeles, an interminable distance to my young mind. We would never see each other again, and life would cloud our friendship in time.

"Gloria, promise you will write," Abby sobbed against my hair.

I nodded. "You must as well." I whispered, "Use our code." We'd come up with our own code for writing messages. At one point, the guards had discovered a page of it and caused quite a stir in the camp. The government people thought the note contained some sort of message for the Japanese military.

Abby finally let me go.

I entered the bus with a silent good-bye but without looking back. Dad and Michael already had seats. I sat immediately behind them, tossed my bag onto the bus seat, and scooted across to the window. The suitcase I'd brought with me to the internment camp years before had long ago vanished, and the government had supplied me with the canvas bag. I had filled it with a few of the personal belongings I had managed to hold on to, like my tennis racket. The handle

stuck out the top of the bag. Mom sat down next to me. She tugged the hem of my skirt down over my knees, and I swatted at her hand.

“Mom!” One of the other girls in the dormitory had gotten hold of a new fashion magazine the week before, and everyone had raised their hems to what seemed the appropriate length. The new hemline, with my knees exposed, did make me feel insecure, but I would never admit that to my mom. Besides, it wasn’t any shorter than some of the uniforms I’d worn to play tennis, but it felt a little weird, not being on the court.

“Indecent,” Mom said.

Michael turned around in his seat and looked at me. Four years younger than me, he would start junior high when we had settled again. I had spent junior high, and my first year of high school, in the camp’s one-room school, with my brother and all the other children. All Japanese children.

“What’s indecent?” Michael asked, his eyes shifting between Mom and me.

“Your sister’s skirt too short,” Mom snapped, folding her hands in her lap and looking forward. Michael grinned, and I rolled my eyes.

The bus filled up with more families returning to their communities. I watched their faces as they filed past. Many appeared older than I knew they were, their faces etched by worry lines and eyes accented by crow’s feet. The government-sponsored diet had swollen some bellies with fat and left others sunken. I could feel the tension and anxiety, a certain tentative joy in the air.

The driver made a last call at the door, took his seat, and revved the bus to life. In a line, all the buses moved toward the internment camp gates. The gates swung open. Some busses headed south, some north. I looked out the window as our bus pulled onto the highway, finally beyond the perimeter of the camp. It didn’t seem real, finally becoming free.

The bus struggled north through the coastal range. To me, the scenery appeared much the same as it had when I'd last traveled down this road. It reassured me, gave me hope that other things had remained stagnant. I pulled a battered copy of a dime-store romance out of my bag and thumbed through the pages, pretending to read. I already knew the story. I had decided I liked boys before internment, when I was still in the sixth grade. Would Xavier Modin remember me when I saw him at school? I recalled his smile and brown eyes, the way the hair around his ears would curl just so on foggy mornings.

The bus stopped in Lompoc and Santa Maria, dry valley towns full of cattle ranches and broccoli farms. Home lay a little less than half an hour to the north. What had the new owner planted in my father's strawberry fields during the war? Probably something useful, not as decadent as our fat, juicy berries. Those berries, which my grandfather and great-grandfather had planted, ever since they'd lived in the United States, had won awards year after year at Arroyo Grande's Harvest Festival. People drove miles to pick their own and buy flats for pies and jams.

But then a cloud fell over my spirits. We didn't really own that farm anymore. Dad had sat on the board of the local Buddhist temple and because he was a prosperous local farmer, the Americans had him at the top of their list. It didn't help that our farm was only a few miles from the coast, a clear beach with few rocks or reefs to impede the arrival of ships or submarines, or that my mother was a native of Japan with strong family ties back there. Orders for our retention came early from the government. White friends had tipped us off. Dad sold the farm right before we'd entered the camp. Other friends hid the money in an account with a white man's name. We had been lucky.

Soldiers had rounded up others in the camp forcefully from their communities. They hid no money, made no arrangements. They would return to their neighborhoods and find other

families living in their homes, other restaurants on the corners, churches where the Shinto and Buddhist temples used to stand. Before internment, I had more interest in going to Sunday school with my white friends than dancing Obon with my mother. Now, I wanted nothing more than to volunteer in the teahouse at the temple and listen to the squirrels and the blue jays in the live oaks outside the shoji screens. I wondered if the teahouse had survived, if a groundskeeper had stayed on through the war to maintain the small Zen garden that graced the approach to the sanctuary.

The scenery outside the bus window grew progressively more familiar. Arroyo Grande lay just on the other side of the eucalyptus grove, down the side of the mesa, then through the strawberry fields. We would pass our old farm.

The bus headed down the side of the mesa. I watched the fields below as we traveled closer. Certainly, there were no berries growing there. Tall and bushy crops, some type of grain no doubt, inhabited the field. I hated to think about those grains reseeding themselves once they were pulled out. The berries would be competing against the unwelcomed grasses for several years. Out toward the horizon, beyond the farmland, beyond the rolling dunes, I could see a strip of gray ocean, striped in white waves.

A deep marine layer covered the sky, blocking out the sun, and drizzle collected on the windshield of the bus. Dad and Michael must have seen what grew in the fields, and they discussed planting. Mom hummed a folksong to herself. I stuffed my book back in my bag and sighed. The bus reached the edge of town now. We drove past the high school where I would start when things settled. Late students ducked apparently undetected onto campus. One or two glanced up at the passing bus. Things would change for those students, too, having to find space in their classrooms for the returning Japanese-American teens. What would we study? History

had changed. The First World War could no longer be called the Great War, not now that the government possessed bombs that could kill hundreds of thousands of people. That *had* killed that many.

The bus pulled to a stop on the corner of Branch and Bridge. The doors opened, and the driver rose from his seat. He exited the bus, already raising a cigarette to his lips.

“This must be our stop,” Dad said. He and Michael stood, and Mom and I followed after. Outside, the driver had propped open the luggage hold, but didn’t remove any of the cargo. Dad dug around and pulled out four army-issue duffle bags, the only possessions we had left in the world. He hefted his own and Mom’s over his shoulder. “You carry your own, kids.”

Michael and I picked ours up, and Dad led us down Bridge Street toward Traffic Way, where we’d left our truck at Jack’s garage. I could tell my father felt happy to be home. Despite the two heavy bags, his steps appeared light and his gait brisk. I hoped it wasn’t a show for our benefit, though. To see him practically prancing like that did me little good. In fact, it only made the worry I had started to feel worse, like he felt like he had to pretend for us, because he knew things might get very, very ugly.

The sky, too, kept me from sharing my father’s feelings. The gray color mimicked the color that often hung over our coastal internment camp. I wished my home were just a little farther away from the camp, just a little more different, so I didn’t see the same plants growing through the cracks in the sidewalk or smell the same salt tang in the air. I couldn’t help but feel that we had just entered some other type of imprisonment. What would the world be like now? I had heard of small pockets of Japanese soldiers, in the South Pacific, who refused to surrender. Would people look at me and associate me with them? Did they still think about Pearl Harbor? Question after question ran through my head. God, Glory, I told myself. Shut up!

“Jack wouldn’t take advantage of us,” Dad told Mom as they walked. Maybe that caused the lead balloon in the pit of my stomach. We were only a few yards away from Jack’s lot, and I couldn’t identify our truck there. Dad led us all into the garage’s office. He stuck his head through an adjoining door into the bay and shouted for Jack. I heard an exuberant yell. Jack came through the door and embraced Dad in a bear hug, his greasy hands leaving palm prints on the back of Dad’s white shirt. Jack sheepishly released Dad and waved at Mom, Michael, and me. We each raised a hand in return.

“I heard they were gonna let you all out of those camps finally, but did you know they’re keeping some of the Germans? Moving ‘em all up to Ellis Island. That’s some crazy shit. Government don’t know when they gonna let ‘em go.”

“Not many Germans where we were,” Dad told Jack. “Hate to seem too ungrateful for your warm welcome, but I’d love to get our truck. Next stop is picking up Duke from the Simmons’ place.”

Jack took a step back, and all joy dropped from his face. He ran his dirty hands up and down the thighs of his coveralls. His eyes found a spot on the office wall and stayed there as he took a deep breath. The lead balloon in my gut seemed to put on weight.

“Now, ah Earl. You left me that title when y’all...went away and, well, things got a little tight during the war, and I...I had to let that old truck go.”

I narrowed my eyes. My dad had bought that truck new less than a year before our internment.

“But, Earl, I swear I’m gonna pay you back every nickel on that truck. In the meantime... Well, come on.”

Jack motioned that we should follow him into the garage. I glanced at my mom; tears

glistened in her eyes. She swiped a hand across her face and marched after Jack and Earl. Michael and I followed.

An old, old Studebaker truck sat in the bay, gleaming in the light coming through the open garage door. Jack had clearly spent a lot of time cleaning it, but that couldn't disguise the fact that it had seen some hard times.

"My ma and pa brought me to California in this here truck, back during the Dust Bowl. Pa can't drive no more, and I've got no use for it, so I want you to have it."

Mom finally burst into sobs and fled back into the office. I went after her.

"The cab of that truck is made of wood," Mom said through her tears. She sat on the wobbly shop stool that functioned as Jack's office chair. A workbench served as a desk, and Mom's elbows rested on it, her face in her hands. I walked up behind my mother and put a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"It's okay, Mom," I told her. "Jake did a real nice job cleaning it up." I glanced back through the office door. Bailing wire held the bumper to the front end of the truck.

"Not okay." Mom looked up and around at me. "We lost everything. Everything your father save, everything your grandfather save, everything your great-grandfather save, since he come to this country."

Mom talked about Dad's ancestors; her own still ran a prosperous market in Hokkaido -- at least they had before the war -- and she had only come to the U.S. two decades before for college. We, of course, hadn't heard from my grandparents in years, and my mother probably wondered if she would ever see them again, or if they were still even alive.

"Our truck gone, Gloria. Our farm gone. What we find next?"

So Mom had the same doubts I did. What did she know about Dad's front he had put on

for us?

From the garage came the sound of the truck starting, the hood panels folding back and clanging on themselves. Some indistinguishable shouts between the men indicated progress with the truck, and the idle smoothed.

A deep, seemingly final sob emanated from Mom.

“I’m done,” she said. Whether my mom meant with everything or just with her breakdown, I couldn’t be sure, but we heard the hood close and the truck pull out of the garage. We exited the office through the front door. Dad sat behind the wheel of the old Studebaker, evidently struggling to keep the bright smile on his face. Michael sat in the back of the truck. I fetched all the duffle bags from the office, taking two trips, and threw them into the back with Michael. I took my backpack off last and threw it in as well.

“Look out for the hole,” Michael told me. A spot in the wood of the bed had rotted through, and I could see the greased axel below me. I had felt a lot of anger in the last few years, but this topped it. I knew my father felt our position tenuous -- being recently reintroduced into the wild, as it were -- but he could have said something, *anything*, to Jack to show he was a little peeved, but instead he acted as if Jack did us a huge favor.

“All right,” Dad said as Mom climbed into the passenger seat. He craned his neck out of the window to peer at Michael and me in the back. “Now, to get Duke.”

I glanced at Michael. His gaze seemed fixed on the rear axle as it turned. A boy and his dog, I thought. I knew Michael was worried that Duke would be weak and skinny from pining for his master these years past. I watched the axel and the road passing along beneath me. God, what a jerk, that Jack. Seriously.

The Simmons farm lay in the opposite direction from home a few miles out of town,

inland into one of the brown, dirty valleys that crisscrossed California's coastal range. The Simmons, long time friends with Dad and Mom, had a daughter Lisa who went to school with Michael. She'd sympathized with Michael when he'd told her what was happening and convinced her parents to let her take Duke while Michael was away, even though nobody knew at the time how long the internment would last.

The truck choked to a stop in front of the Simmons' frame farmhouse. Michael vaulted over the edge of the truck and ran for the front door.

Lisa answered the door and embraced Michael in a quick hug. I watched as they exchanged words. Lisa looked away, unable to meet Michael's eyes. I felt that cold fist in my stomach.

Michael finally turned away from Lisa and stumbled back to the truck. She called after him, "I'll see you at school," but he didn't acknowledge these final words.

He crossed to the driver-side window and leaned his head on the windowsill. "He's gone," Michael whispered. I leaned over the edge of the truck toward him.

"What?" I asked.

"He got in a fight with a coyote. Got bit. They had to put him down." Michael climbed back into the truck with none of the enthusiasm he'd had when they'd arrived only moments before. Strike two, I thought. I watched a tear drop down my brother's cheek. He propped one of the duffle bags up as a pillow and lay down in the truck.

I started to feel anger toward Lisa. I wanted to get out of the truck and grab her and shake her. How could she let that happen to that damn dog? But I stopped myself. *This* was bad luck, not the same thing as what Jack had done.

Dad started the truck and turned back the way we came. I rested a hand on my brother's

knee, hoping to comfort him a little. I hadn't really liked Duke that much. He'd chewed up my one good pair of school shoes once, but having a dog did wonders for keeping little brothers out of one's hair. I hoped Michael wouldn't mourn too long, so we could find him another dog to keep him entertained.

Dad turned down another road, wide and private. The barbed wire fences on either side showed no signs of rust, and the posts hardly weathered. Beyond, fat cattle grazed peacefully. The road ended at a large, Spanish-style house. A long, low sedan hunched in the driveway. It, like the fence, was too new to show any signs of wear. I sighed deeply as my father pulled to a stop behind the gleaming car. Everything about the house spoke of wealth and prosperity, from the perfectly manicured cactus garden to the painted wrought iron. Bright tiles depicting peacocks and roses surrounded the windows and front door.

We all exited the truck and clustered around the entryway.

"Now, best behavior," Dad warned us. My mom patted her hair, and I fixed the hem of my skirt. Michael appeared despondent, Duke no doubt still at the front of his mind.

Dad knocked on the door, and we waited patiently.

"*Sì, sì, sì,*" came from the opposite side, and it opened to reveal a plump, graying housekeeper. Dad knew her; she'd worked for Mr. Lewis for over a decade. I heard once that, back in the late twenties, when she was young and pretty, Sonia had been the housemaid to an infamous opium dealer, a Mr. Lee. He'd lost her to Jim Lewis in a mahjong game late one night. Mr. Lee was an old man now, and I'd been to his curio shop in San Luis Obispo. I found it hard to believe he'd ever dealt in anything beside folding paper lanterns and small statues of Chinese gods.

"Sonia, is Mr. Lewis in?" Dad asked, seeming to remember at the last minute to take his

hat off his head.

“Jes. Come in. I get him.” She waved the family into the foyer and waddled off, calling, “Yim, Yim,” in her best approximation of “Jim.”

I looked at my feet as we waited. I didn’t want anyone else to see the despair that surely must be betrayed on my face. When I heard footsteps on the terracotta floor, I glanced up. Jim Lewis wore dark blue Levis, a crisp white shirt, and a Stetson hat. He carried himself forward with confidence, coming straight for Dad and grasping him by the shoulders. Mr. Lewis gave Dad a hearty, companionable shake and a pat on the back.

“Come in, come in,” he said, motioning us to follow him into his living room. The furniture there was covered in cowhide, studded with bronze tacks. Mr. Lewis showed us to a large, stiff sofa and led Dad across the room to a pair of club chairs. They sat down, drew their heads together, and began speaking in hushed tones.

I watched my mother’s hands, knotted together as they were the last time she saw Mr. Lewis. It had been at our kitchen table, as Dad and Mr. Lewis had hammered out the agreement to sell our farm.

I looked then at Michael then. His elbows rested on his knees and his head in his hands. I could hear the rise and fall of hushed voices as Dad and Mr. Lewis conversed.

I leaned against the sofa and let my head rest on its back. I stared at the ceiling, traced the wagon wheel chandelier with my eyes, counted knots in the artificially aged beams, and then let my lids droop. We’d left the camp mere hours before, but it seemed like days, if not weeks, had passed. I felt drained. I wanted to go home and sleep in my own bed. I could not really remember what it was like because I’d spent the last four years sleeping on a wood-slat bunk in a dorm filled with other people. I worried field mice had taken up residence in my mattress and chewed

the eyes out of my wax dolls. I'd outgrown those dolls, anyway, but they would still be on my shelf, if my room was how I left it.

“Gloria?” my father’s voice broke into my mind. I opened my eyes and looked at him. “We have to go to the bank. Jim here says there are some issues we need to deal with.”

To me, it didn’t sound promising. My dad appeared tired, older in the last few minutes than in the last four years. We all rose and piled back into the truck. Mr. Lewis climbed into his sedan and pulled out. Dad followed in the truck. We drove back to downtown Arroyo Grande.

The morning had started with high hopes. And now, one by one, reality had crushed those hopes. Mr. Lewis probably wanted the anonymous, third-party banker to tell Dad that, for some reason or another, we couldn’t have our farm back. I watched the familiar landscape pass by. The hillsides were little different from those surrounding the camp. The oaks, the gold grasses, the blooming mustard along the side of the road. Were the camps that bad? I had friends my own age, three square meals... My stomach rumbled. I had eaten breakfast – powdered eggs and deviled ham – before I left the camp, but time for lunch had come and gone. I thought about the cafe on Branch where I used to get hamburgers and shakes after school. Was it still open? I raised my eyes as we pulled into town and watched the storefronts. There it was, a few kids waiting outside until a spot at the counter opened. I recognized some of the boys. Over three years of adolescence wreaked havoc on a body. Dad parked the truck in the small lot to the side of the bank. Mr. Lewis waited nearby, having already parked. I sat with my back against the cab of the truck.

“Let’s go,” Mom prompted, her face twisted with concern.

I shook my head. “I’m gonna wait here.” I crossed my arms and looked up into the progressively bluer sky. I tried to clear my mind as I knew the Zen Buddhists could do. I thought

neither about the camp nor about my immediate future. I put the idea of having to sleep in the back of the truck out of mind. I forgot about Duke and teahouses and strawberries and high school and the length of my skirt. All that remained was the blue of a free California sky and the breeze that smelled of salt and dry vegetation and axel grease.

“Hey.”

I recognized that voice. It seemed deeper than before, but the quality was unmistakable. Xavier Modin. I opened my eyes and sat up. There he stood, his arms resting on the sidewall of the truck bed. One hand held a malted in a paper cup. Xavier sucked at the straw thoughtfully.

“Gloria, huh? Been awhile.”

“Yeah, like, three years,” I managed to get out. He was cuter than I remembered. “We just got back today.”

He nodded and sucked at his drink again. “That skirt’s nice,” he said, raising a suggestive eyebrow.

“Thanks,” I said but still reached down to pull it a little lower over my knee. My face felt hot. Could he see me blushing?

“My brother just got back from Japan; he was stationed over there. He told me some things about Japanese girls.” Xavier tilted his head and smiled wickedly. “These Geishas? They true?”

Oh, God. I felt sick to my stomach. Was this the same kid I’d daydreamed about in the sixth grade? I could tell he meant something lewd. When had his mind turned to stuff like that? How dare he! “Take a long walk off a short pier, Modin.” I couldn’t believe I’d had the guts to say it. I threw my hair and leaned back against the cab of the truck. I crossed my arms and looked away. I had very quickly found Xavier Modin to be no longer cute. But in that, I found

my sliver of normalcy; I could still tell a boy off.

“Am I going to see you around school?” He tried to pull me back into the conversation.

“I don’t know.” I hoped he could pick up on the venom in my voice. So what if I wouldn’t end up Mrs. Xavier Modin, spending his granddad’s fortune on fine hats and furs. I didn’t need any of that anyway.

“I go to St. Pat’s now. They kicked me out of A.G.H.S.”

“You probably deserved it.” My parents would never send me to Catholic school, but I might see him if the A.G.H.S. tennis team played St. Pat’s. Of course, I’d have to make the team first. And I hadn’t hit a ball in awhile, let alone played a match.

“See you around then.” Xavier turned and walked across the parking lot toward Branch Street. He didn’t glance once behind him as he went. Good. It wasn’t like I had expected him to ask me to go steady right then and there, did I? And what was that comment about Japanese girls? It made my skin crawl just thinking about it again.

I couldn’t be sure how much time had passed, but I heard my family return. I lowered my eyes to look at them, to try to learn something from the looks they cast me about our situation. Would we be sleeping in the truck tonight? My eyes went first to my dad. I studied that smile to see if it was the same he’d worn all day, with that hint of strain that told me he forced it.

The strain had gone.

From the side of the truck, Michael pushed a hamburger wrapped in paper and a bottle of Coca-Cola into my hands. He still looked a little drawn, but the corners of his mouth turned up a bit when he spoke.

“Don’t forget to return the bottle,” he told me as he climbed into the bed. “Dad wants his deposit back.”

“Ready to go?” Dad asked as he opened the driver side door.

“Where?” My words came out muffled. The burger had raw onions; I decided I didn’t care. I felt as if I could stuff the entire thing into my mouth and then eat another and another and another.

“Home,” Mom said. I looked at my mom, her face placid like there was nothing wrong with the world at all. I remembered a time when I’d seen my mother’s face in candlelight, how the glow seemed to smooth out all her laugh lines. She looked like that now, only in full daylight. The fist let go of my gut. We had got the farm back. For that, Mr. Lewis would always be all right by me.

I smiled too; I’m sure there was lettuce in my teeth.

We headed home. I entered my own room for the first time in what felt like an eternity. I had to unpack my things. I looked at all those wax dolls on the shelves around my white vanity. I began taking them down, one by one, and stowing them in the duffle bag. When it was full and the shelves were bare, I shoved the duffle bag under the bed. I took my racket out of the rucksack. I spun it in my hand.

That night, at dinner, we sat at the kitchen table, and Mom served rice and fish in our old chipped rice bowls. Michael poured tea. The house’s electricity was still off, so a hurricane lamp burned at the center of the table. As I ate my first home-cooked dinner in years, I wondered how soon I could go back to school. Would the kids still look at me and see enemy? Or would they see Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Would they see just Gloria? Did they even care? What would I wear? Questions about shoes and temple and boys and English class all flitted through my head. Things I had never had to worry about in camp.

Freedom was hard.

1990, again

I stopped, sighed. The sun had set, and crickets chirped in the leaves under the eucalyptus trees.

“You really said that?” Eddie asked.

“What?”

“You told that kid to take a long walk off a short pier? I didn’t think people actually said that.”

That’s what he’d taken from the story? “Shut up, Eddie.” I thought back to that day again, to how wonderful that burger had tasted and that real smile on my father’s lips. “I’m done for the night. Why don’t you go on home?”

“You sure you don’t want me to stay?”

I nodded, and he stood and headed across the lot to his own trailer. I watched him walk through the dark, hitching up his old board shorts as he walked. When I heard his own trailer door slam shut, I got up and went inside, taking the letter and the check with me.

Pete Sampras was ahead. I sighed.

I looked down again at the letter from the president. I spent a few afternoons a week volunteering at the Buddhist temple. I knew that many there had waited for years for this gesture from the government. Some of the women I helped out with had been older when they had gone into the camps, had lost much more than I had. I looked at the check. I could buy a new truck with it, I supposed, but what good would that do? It wouldn’t replace that old Chevy Jack had sold. My father had been dead for twenty years, my mother ten. I was old; my brother was old.

And goddamn it, I hadn’t made the Arroyo Grande High tennis team that first year or the

next. In my senior year, I'd managed to get on the junior varsity team. We did play St. Pat's that year, but that school had already kicked Xavier out as well, and some of his classmates told me his parents had sent him to the valley to work on his uncle's farm. Get his head right, they said.

Too little, too late.

I put the letter and check down on the kitchen counter and then opened up the cupboard; I found the bottle of tequila I kept for special occasions. This felt special enough. I screwed off the cap and took a swig. I swallowed and sighed. The booze felt good, burning a trail down my throat to join the beer already there.

I thought about my life. My husband had been a good man; he grew sugar beets and diversified with this trailer park. He'd looked after me until his death. Sure, I'd never gone to college or had kids, but I had a community here and friends. I had Eddie; he kept me entertained enough.

I took another drink. Maybe I should've gone after him, tried to voice my feelings. I'd never told him how I used to play tennis, how it all sort of got ruined for me by the time I'd spent in that camp. I couldn't even recall ever telling him about the camp.

I raised the bottle again.

Nah, he could wait till morning.

Independence

1976

“So come on down to Chuck Watson Datsun, convenient to Santa Barbara and Los Angeles. We’ve got the largest selection of 1977 model year Datsuns, 810’s, 1600’s, 1800’s, Glorias, and of course, the brand-new 280Z! Ask about our special Bicentennial financing! Remember, here at Chuck Watson Datsun, we’ll put the ‘sun’ in your car buying experience!”

Chuck turned away from the camera, scowled, coughed, and then looked at his brother-in-law, Marco. “That good enough?” he asked.

Marco unshouldered his camera, nodding. Another of his wife’s brothers, Tony, lowered his boom mic.

“Same time next week, then?” Chuck asked. He moved off to the showroom without waiting for an answer, and the other men packed up their equipment in a windowless panel van and left. Chuck was glad to be done with his in-laws. His wife’s family had been “run out” of New Jersey in the late sixties and then settled in Thousand Oaks. Chuck liked to think they were *Mafiosi*, and the story he created in his head had to do with a rival Irish gang, much stronger, moving in on their turf. That’s how they could have their meaty fingers in the local media industry so easily. They must have had family ties out here when they’d arrived. If he’d known when he’d met Delia, he would never have married her. One day, maybe those Mick gangsters would come to his dealership one day with guns flaring and... Fuck. He shook his head. His analyst had told him to stop telling himself stories like that, but it wasn’t as easy as all that. He needed a little spice in his life, after all, and pretending he was in his own version of *The Godfather* sort of helped get him through the day. Delia was a good wife, and her brothers were,

well, loyal; they didn't even charge him to film his ad spots. Chuck knew no one had run them out of Jersey; they'd come out because Delia wanted to make it in show biz. She ended up with Chuck instead, because reality was *that* boring.

Chuck pushed open the door to his air-conditioned, glass-fronted showroom. On a spinning pedestal stood a top-of-the-line Datsun Presidential, turning slowly beneath high-wattage lights. Each bit of chrome sparkled and glinted. As Chuck passed the car, he took off his plaid jacket and rolled-up the sleeves of his lemon-yellow, polyester dress shirt. He had no office, not even a cubicle. The modern, open showroom featured round tables with padded chairs where dealer and buyer could relax and discuss bottom lines without feeling pressured.

Chuck fell into one of these chairs and lowered his forehead to his up-turned hands. He stared down at the glossy, black tabletop. A cloudy spot, where he'd spilled coffee earlier in the day, marred the surface. He didn't know how long he sat there, staring, trying to make sense of the sticky, milky blob.

"It's him. It's really him."

Chuck heard the woman's whisper and lifted his head. He looked at her, standing on the other side of the table. The woman and the man with her wore matching orange pantsuits.

"Well, I'll be," the man said. "You see him on TV, but you don't really expect him to be the one to sell you your car, do you?"

Chuck plastered his salesman's facade back on his face. He stood quickly and reached a hand across the table. He didn't bother introducing himself; they obviously already knew who he was.

The other man took his hand. "I'm Dean Graves, and this is the wife, Mrs. Graves."

Chuck smiled his biggest TV smile. "What can I do to put the two of you in a new Z this

afternoon?” One look at the Graves, and Chuck knew exactly what they wanted. Part of his gift.

Chuck crammed into the back of the sports car as Dean and the little lady took turns driving up and down the highway. The car they chose was almost the same color as their matching suits. Once in the hot seat, dealership lights glinting off of Mrs. Graves’s peroxidized hair, Chuck dazzled them with numbers as only he could.

The couple left that day with their new Z and promised to tell everyone that, yes indeed, Chuck Watson *had* put the “sun” in their car buying experience, just as he promised on the advertisements, and it really was worth the drive up the One-Oh-One from Los Angeles.

Back at his table, Chuck put his head in his hands again. His facade slid off his features like an egg off Teflon. He turned his wrist slightly and, through half-closed eyes, glanced at his Rolex. Ten minutes and he could go home. Since they were normally closed on Sundays anyway, Chuck had decided to close on Saturday the third, too. That would mean an honest-to-God two-day weekend, complete with all the barbeques, fireworks, and beer that always accompanied the Fourth. Chuck smiled at the thought. Maybe this weekend, he would be able to have a real “family-style” holiday and return to work Monday refreshed, if a little hung-over. What was a good block party without a lot of beer, after all?

“Come on, Chuck,” Bob Simmons said as he walked up to the table. “Let’s go get a drink.”

Chuck looked up at him. It was now six. He thought about going home to his wife right away. He told Bob, “Why not?”

They locked up the dealership and headed down the street. On the other side of the chain link fence dividing the frontage road from the highway, the One-Oh-One crawled by, rush hour traffic mixing with the beach traffic and travelers of the long weekend.

Chuck followed Bob into a low brick building painted gunmetal gray, the dive where they often drank after work. Chuck stifled a choke as he entered; the interior was thick with smoke and smelled of stale beer, stale peanuts, stale smoke, and stale lives. As they approached the bar, the bartender, anticipating their needs, put two boilermakers on the bar. Chuck and Bob took their drinks to a table at the back of the bar and sat down. Beneath their asses, the vinyl, patched with duct tape, squeaked and sighed. Chuck and Bob clinked the edges of their shot glasses together and then drained their contents.

“So,” Bob began. “Plans for the Fourth?”

“Maybe the block party and fireworks?” Chuck took a swallow of his beer. “Should we have closed on Monday, too?”

“Naw, all those federal workers have the day off. We’ll have a good sales day.”

“You think?” Chuck drank again. He reached into the pocket of his shirt and withdrew a pack of cigarettes. He took one, tapped it against the table, and then lit it from the lighter that Bob offered. Chuck dragged meditatively. “You happy, Bob?” he asked. Smoke trickled from his nostrils, and then he exhaled.

“Yah, why not?” Bob replied. He picked at the label on his bottle.

They had another round, and then walked back over to the lot. Chuck said good night to Bob and then went behind the showroom to where he parked his own car. He removed the cover from his 1968 Ford Mustang fastback. He felt like he had to hide it from the prying eyes of his customers. He didn’t know what would happen if one of them found out he didn’t drive a Z. In fact, when it was light late in the summer, as he drove home he would wear a cap and big glasses, hoping to disguise his all-too-recognizable face from casual observers.

But this car was so worth it, same model, same color, same everything as the one Steve

McQueen drove in *Bullitt*. When Chuck wasn't fantasizing about gangland warfare, he pretended he drove the streets of San Francisco, chasing some bad mother like he was some renegade cop out for justice.

After Chuck slipped into the driver's seat, he took the ball cap and sunglasses from the passenger's side and put them on. He looked at the paper sack from the donut shop sitting on the seat and reminded himself to throw it away when he got home. He started the engine, reveling in the sound of the American V-8, and pulled down the back alley, away from the dealership; he did not leave from the front of the lot.

The drive home to his new, ranch-style tract house in the foothills, where his mob -- *not mob. God, Chuck* -- wife waited, was uneventful. The drinks had served to take the edge off his day filming -- they loved to call it shooting -- with Marco and Tony.

When Chuck arrived at the house, he discovered his wife had, again, parked her Fairlady in the garage. She was afraid, she had told him, of the season's erratic Pacific thunderstorms and their effect on the delicate canvas top of the roadster. Chuck had tried to explain to her how important it was for him to park in the garage and for her to park in the driveway, so people would see the Datsun in front of Chuck Watson's house and not see the Ford. Chuck sat idling the big Mustang, thinking. With a sigh of resignation, and realizing he was potentially drawing more attention by waiting in the middle of the street, he finally pulled into the driveway, furtively glancing left and right to make sure none of his neighbors watched him arrive.

He got out, dressed the car in its cover, and then ducked into the garage. Chuck flipped the switch and watched the garage door until it closed securely. He crossed the garage to the door that led into the laundry room.

He heard the television on, which was not that shocking, but the smell that hit him as he

rounded into the kitchen left his jaw slack and his mind numb.

”What is that?” Chuck shouted. He looked across the kitchen’s bar to the living room, where Delia sat, dressed in a jogging suit and watching the news. Chuck knew she had a crush on the evening anchor; he was on her “list,” one of the things she told him liberated women had.

“Hey, baby.” Delia tilted her head away from the TV just enough to appear as if she was interested in the fact that Chuck was home, but her eyes never left the screen. Her voice seemed particularly nasally and whiny. “Grace loaned me a stack of her Weight Watchers recipe cards, so I whipped something up.”

“What is it?”

“Cabbage casserole and Mackerelly.”

“What?”

“Geez.” This time she actually turned her head and looked at him. “The cards are on the counter.” Before she’d finished speaking, her gaze went right back to the screen.

Chuck walked over, taking off his hat and glasses and placing them on the counter. He saw the recipes and shuffled through them. “This is the only thing of these you’re going to make, right?”

He found the Mackerelly card. Sure enough, mackerel was a key ingredient, diced to little bits with an assortment of other things.

“Maybe I’ll just have a can of chili?” Chuck thought aloud, though he wasn’t sure, with the stench being what it was, that he would be able to eat that.

“Don’t be silly.” Delia popped up off the couch, the big, dark curls framing her face bouncing with her. She literally jogged over to the kitchen and started getting down plates from the cupboard. Chuck watched her, the corners of his mouth drawn down in a sort of fearful

grimace. Delia served two dishes with large spoons, and each portion created a sort of quivering mass on its respective half of the plate. Chuck noticed that she gave herself portions about half the size of his. She placed the plates down on the kitchen bar, hers within reach of the large kitchen ashtray so she could still face the screen and smoke as she ate. Chuck crossed to the other side and took a stool facing her, so he could at least pretend that he was having dinner with his wife, rather than his wife and Mr. Greased Pompadour of channel six. Chuck knew after her entrée into the world of entertainment had failed, Delia had become obsessed with news, thinking that her big break would come through that. Her brothers went into the advertising business for her, hoping to make the right connections. So far, her auditions had never resulted in a callback.

After a moment's thought, Chuck got up and went to the garage refrigerator, returning with two bottles of beer. He twisted the top off one as he sat back down on his stool and then smiled at Delia, a sort of forced smile, he knew, but he wanted to make some sort of connection.

"How was your day?" he asked. *God, how contrived.*

Delia chewed her Mackerelly as she watched the TV, a lit cigarette smoking in the tray.

"Same old thing, really," she told him around a mouthful of the bargain fish. "Went to the gym, met Grace for coffee. Cooked dinner."

"I..." he began. Chuck suddenly realized that, on that very day, he had bested his sales record. He mentally counted again how many cars he had sold, ending with the tangerine dream 280Z. He'd outsold himself by two.

Delia talked about the cold front coming down from Alaska, her fork pointed at the TV on the other side of the living room. Chuck thought about sharing his sales record, maybe breaking out a bottle of sparkling rosè and taking Delia to the movies, but then he looked down

at the Cabbage Casserole Czarina and a feeling of grim despair settled over him again.

“Should we go to the Johnson’s tonight for Scrabble?” Chuck asked, hoping that his tone suggested, “Hell, no, we will not.” One of the things she drilled into him was routine, including which nights they hung out with which friends. It stifled Chuck, but also caused him to suspect that she planned something; didn’t hit men need to know schedules so they could follow their target around to get a good shot? *Maybe that’s what she’s planning.* Chuck thought about what it would feel like to pretend someone was following him. How covert could he be? Could he detect his hunter in time? Could he, in turn, become the seeker?

“Of course. Isn’t it Friday?”

So they’d take him down at Scrabble. He wouldn’t let it happen! Chuck shook his head and set down his fork. He reached across the bar and took Delia’s half smoked Virginia Slim out of the ashtray and finished it in two long drags.

“Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.” It was his best Clark Gable. He stamped the butt out in the tray and stood. Chuck knew that, if he were to walk down his street, back out of the development, and then take another five blocks along Moorpark, he would come to an old roadhouse-style bar. He’d never been there before, but tonight he felt adventurous. Chuck picked up his unopened beer and left for this walk without another word to Delia. He headed back to Moorpark then walked back toward the highway. As he walked through the warm night, one large truck and two vans passed him.

Chuck watched them go by in a flash of bright colors. On the back of the last one, he could make out, in the dim light of the streetlamps, PROFESSOR LEE’S FIREWORK EXTRAVAGANZA. The words were painted in large, red, Chinatown letters, and a long, green dragon twined his body through all the holes in the O’s and A’s. They must be in charge of the

display for the Fourth. Chuck unscrewed the cap of his bottle and took a long drink, watching the taillights of the van as it rounded a corner. He thought it would be nice moving around like that, always seeing new cities, nothing keeping you tied down to one place.

Chuck drank his beer as he walked the last few hundred yards to the bar. He left his empty bottle by the door and pushed in.

Delia prodded him, her long, manicured nails digging into the flesh of his chest.

“What?” Chuck asked. He couldn’t remember how he had gotten home the night before, but at least he was home, in bed, and the sun had decided to come up. Delia was up, too, a Virginia Slim in the hand she wasn’t using to molest him.

“Get up. We have to get the house ready.”

“You want me to get up now?” Why wasn’t she pissed about last night?

“Geez,” Delia said. “We have to mow the lawn and get the bunting and flags up today.”

“Do we?” Ugh, the block captain would have a fit if the decorations weren’t up by the beginning of the party tomorrow.

“Come on, Chuck.”

“Can I shower first?” he asked, sitting up. He ran his tongue back and forth across the roof of his mouth, trying to scrape off the flavor that seemed to linger there from the night before. His stomach rumbled. “Make me some eggs?”

“Sure thing.” Delia bounced up and jogged out of the room.

Chuck got his naked body out of bed and went into the shower. He took one, quick and hot, and then pulled on some jeans and a T-shirt.

When he arrived in the kitchen, he found a plate of scrambled eggs with some of the left

over Mackerelly folded in. “What is this?” He pointed to the plate.

“You didn’t eat it last night, and I didn’t want any to go to waste.”

This was, Chuck felt, another one of her strange plots. Something to do with the mafia, no doubt. Mackerel seemed to be a fish they liked. At least, there sure had been a lot of it around the house lately. Odd given that there were so many other fish in the sea. And they had money, so it wasn’t a budget thing. Chuck had seen the cards from the night before; labeled “Fish Favorites,” Delia also had a recipe for Fluffy Mackerel Pudding and Mackerel on Toast. Maybe mackerel was being used to smuggle something. Or maybe he had a mackerel allergy he didn’t know about, and she was trying to off him that way. Make room for the anchor man! Maybe he could get her first, like in some kind of Hitchcock film where the husband finds out the wife is trying to off him so he offs her first...

Oh, stop it, Chuck. Hitchcock never made a movie like that, but it would be so good.

Chuck pondered the half-eaten jelly donut from the day before still sitting on the passenger seat of the Mustang. He shoveled two mouthfuls of eggs and fish into his mouth then pushed back from the bar, pretending to be stuffed.

“Should I start on the lawn?” Without an answer, Chuck stood and headed into the garage. He slipped rubber boots over his bare feet and opened the garage door. Hot July air streamed in. Chuck forced his way out into the day, pushing the lawnmower ahead of him like some kind of wheeled shield. It took eight pulls on the string before the mower started. He pushed it back and forth across the already-short grass, the sweat trickling down his brow as he labored in the sun. Finally, as he finished with the mowing, Delia came out with a box of red, white, and blue decorations. She wore a T-shirt with the American flag printed across the front and small, very tight shorts that showcased her ass as she tried to reach and hang bunting across

the top of their large picture window. Chuck looked up and down the block. Chuck wanted to point and say, “You fucking see that? I get to bang that ass,” but it seemed sort of crass, and no one else had started their preparations yet.

For a moment, Chuck forgot all about the mafia stuff and Steve McQueen. Sure, Delia may have married Chuck because a Japanese car dealer was the closest thing she could find to a producer in Thousand Oaks -- and he knew she wanted him to use her in his ads -- but he had married her for that ass. The mower sputtered to death as it ran out of gas; Chuck just stood there, mesmerized by the flexing and relaxing of one cheek then the other beneath the soft covering of the drawstring, terrycloth shorts.

Out of nowhere, he asked, “Why aren’t you mad at me about last night?”

“Should I be? You just needed some time to yourself, right? Besides, the Johnsons called right after you left; little Brad had a fever, and they cancelled.”

That sounded suspicious. Delia was no doubt used to men stealing off into the night to take care of some unannounced business, Chuck reminded himself. She was tricky, this one. Hell, maybe she’d rendezvoused with her anchorman while Chuck was at the bar, and they’d done something really dirty, so she couldn’t be mad at him because she was riddled with her own guilt.

Shut up, Chuck.

“Put the flags up,” Delia told him, going back about her bunting-hanging business.

Chuck put the mower back in the shed and took out one hundred tiny American flags. Every six inches, he planted one along the edge of the grass until they created a tiny, waving fence around the lawn, just as the neighborhood president had instructed.

Delia unboxed the large American flag and stuck its pole in the bracket next to the front

door.

“There,” she stated firmly, stepping back and admiring the view. Around them, other neighbors were also up, finally, decorating for the next day’s Bicentennial celebration. The block captain, under the guidance of the neighborhood president, had made sure that each house had identical flags, bunting, banners, etc.

“I’m making a jellied, red cabbage salad for the party tomorrow,” Delia told Chuck as they stood on their sidewalk, watching the neighbors.

“Really?” Chuck asked.

“Yeah, it’s really elegant. Comes out of a mold and everything.”

“You think people will like that?”

“Sure.” She seemed confident, almost too confident.

“Hmm. Is it too early for a beer?”

“Yes, but you can have one anyway.”

She wants me drunk early for some reason, Chuck thought. He didn’t let it stop him from going into the garage and taking a cold one out of the fridge. Delia followed him into the cool of the shade.

“Is everything all right?” she asked.

“Why?”

“You’ve been acting kind of strange lately.”

“Strange how?” Chuck took a long drink from the cold bottle. He let out a hackneyed “ahhhh,” and then leaned his head over and wiped his lips on the sleeve of his T-shirt. It felt sort of good to be acting like a normal guy, drinking beer and sweating and pushing a mower, rather than being just a recognizable face on some sort of car-selling automaton.

“You been seeing your analyst?”

“What has that got to do with anything?” Chuck asked. He’d missed a couple of appointments.

Delia didn’t answer, just stood there looking at him, her head tilted to one side and her arms crossed. Chuck looked down her tan, bare legs, planted firmly, at a comfortable distance, on the gray concrete of the garage floor. The white canvas tennis shoes on her feet were marked with a few small grass stains.

Chuck lifted his gaze, narrowing his eyes, and took another swallow of his beer, viewing her suspiciously.

“I know what will fix you up,” Delia said, cocking an eyebrow and nodding, making her brown curls bob and dance. “Finish your beer, baby.”

Chuck did as he was told, then allowed himself to be dragged into the bedroom, where, much to his surprise, they made love in the afternoon. He’d thought that was illegal or something. But what would Delia care if it were illegal or not?

Chuck looked down the long row of mismatched picnic tables that lined the sidewalk. He sighed. Glistening in the sun were no less than a dozen gelled red cabbage salads, each seeming to sway in time with the next, causing a bizarre sort of purple gelatinous wave lasting the length of the block. Evidently, the recipe cards had made the circuit through the neighborhood, and all the wives had dubbed the elegant and festive enough to grace the Fourth of July block party tables.

Chuck watched the undulations, and they seemed to hypnotize him. Between the heat and the beer and the shimmery glints in his eye, he felt himself sort of slipping away. He took a swig of his beer, hoping the cold down his throat would snap him back just a little bit into reality. The

block captain walked up, wearing an American flag apron and clutching an oversized set of barbeque tongs in one hand and a beer in the other.

“Hey. Big day?” Chuck said, nodding.

The captain nodded in reply. He seemed preoccupied with something. Chuck followed his gaze. The man was staring at the cabbage salads. They seemed to have the same effect on him that they had on Chuck. Chuck pried his eyes away and tried to do his best to snap the captain out of his trance.

“Beer helps,” Chuck said, raising his own in salute. “Block looks great, doesn’t it?”

The neighbor nodded again, took a sip of his own beer, and belched.

“How are the kids?” Chuck prompted.

The man shrugged indifferently.

“Well, I’ll see you later.” Chuck raised his bottle a second time in a mock toast and turned away. *The silent treatment, eh.* He walked a few steps toward his own lawn, where Delia sat, a group of women around her, all in folding chairs and wearing red, white, and blue sun visors. They were drinking something that had come out of a blender. To Chuck, their voices sounded like a flock of western gulls following a fishing boat. Around them, children ran and laughed, making soap bubbles and squirting water guns. Chuck downed his beer and went for another one, searching through the long line of iceboxes under the long line of picnic table until he found a Coors.

Somebody came up and shoved a bunned hot dog into his empty hand, but Chuck took awhile to figure out it was even there. After effects of the mesmerizing cabbage, he figured. When he looked down at his stuffed hand, he cocked his head to one side and raised his eyebrows. He took a bite and started ambling down the street, toward the end of the line of

tables. To him, it looked now as if the cabbage salads were plotting something. He thought about scheduling an appointment with his analyst.

“Hey, Chuck,” Harvey Levy said from the other side of the tables. Harvey’s tone was appropriately conspiratorial. He drove one of Chuck’s Z’s, and Chuck had bought his Mustang from Harvey. Chuck looked at his friend.

“What’s going on, Harvey?” Chuck asked as he approached.

“How’s that Ford treating you?” Harvey replied.

“How’s that Z treating *you*?” Chuck responded.

They both nodded knowingly with small smiles and just as quickly parted company. They both worried about being seen together in public, since they should have been sworn enemies, being rival car dealers and all.

Chuck took a seat on top of one of the iceboxes, finished his hot dog, and drank his beer. Somehow, another beer found its way into his hand and another and another as the Fourth of July sun steadily sank toward the west.

Suddenly, Harvey’s voice rang out above the mild din of the block party. “I’ll take the kids to the beach to see the fireworks! Everyone in the back of the F150.”

Chuck watched the other adults thinking. Maybe they wanted to go? But no, too many beers and blender drinks left to consume, and everything needed putting away. They’d stay. Chuck, on the other hand, didn’t want to stay.

It was as if the bright, new F-150 -- Harvey’s other car -- was a magnet and all the kids on the block were shavings of iron.

“You want to ride with me, Chuck?” Harvey called out.

Chuck stood and set his most recently empty bottle down on the street next to all the

others. Of course he wanted to ride. “Sure, why not?”

He ambled over to the truck and climbed into the passenger seat. The kids in the back were noisy, bouncing around and shrieking as they tried to find comfortable spots on the hard bed. Chuck rolled down the window and hung his arm out into the quickly dimming night. The fireworks would start at nine, and he was sure Harvey wanted to find a good parking place on the bluffs.

Harvey revved his V-8 to life and pulled out of his driveway. All the wives, still sitting in their lawn chairs and sipping their blender drinks, waved goodbye. The other husbands, thankful for a few moments without the kids, coalesced into a small circle around one of the grills and lit cigars.

Harvey aimed the truck toward the great Pacific Ocean and, between the booze and the lulling of the humming engine, Chuck nodded off.

He awoke to the sound of distant thunder, of crackling spark fountains and children cheering. Chuck opened his eyes and looked out across the hood of the F-150. He took a deep breath as he sat up. The smell of gunpowder saturated the air and clouds of smoke drifted across the ocean like small, dry rain clouds.

This is it, Chuck thought. His eyes took in the sight of the backs of the children’s heads as they leaned against the front of the truck, eyes skyward. Once in awhile, one of Harvey’s kids would turn around and look at his dad through the windshield. His eyes were filled with awe and excitement.

Chuck opened the truck door and got out. He walked toward the edge of the bluff. Now, over the sound of the kids and the fireworks, he could also here the crashing surf below. But his eyes didn’t leave the explosions in the air above him.

Chuck couldn't remember anything as wondrous as the power the lights and colors seemed to have over the children and over himself. Even though the rockets launched from a few miles down the beach, the show still seemed spectacular, and the distant, delayed booms of the explosion added to the overall effect. As the show crescendoed -- red, white, and blue stars blossoming all along the horizon -- Chuck turned to look back at the children.

Chuck realized that *he* wanted to inspire that type of awe in someone. He wanted to have people clap and *ooo* over what he did, not just the low prices he could get them. No one would ever cheer with genuine enthusiasm for setting a sales record on new cars.

Chuck felt the children's amazement wash over him; for a moment, he thought they directed it at him. A smile spread across his face. He raised his hands slightly and started to take a bow.

But then reality struck. Chuck shook his head sadly. Something in his life needed to change, but he didn't know what. He needed to end all the little delusions running through his head. No more mafia or car chases or secret liaisons with news anchors. None of it.

Something had to change.

Later that night, Chuck crawled into bed beside his already sleeping wife. She snored mildly, a sign that the margaritas had gotten the better of her. Before drifting off, Chuck switched on the alarm. After all, tomorrow was going to be the big sales extravaganza, and all those federal workers with the day off would be dying to buy a Japanese car.

Bleary eyed, Chuck pulled his Mustang into the back of his lot and parked, quickly covering it. The air was heavy with moisture; a thick marine layer hung heavy over the morning. Chuck walked around to the front of the building, sifting through his huge ring of keys as he did, finally

locating the key to the main entrance. He stopped for a moment and looked out at the frontage road that ran along his lot. Parked there were three vehicles, two panel vans and a large truck. On the side of the panel vans was written UNCLE LEE'S FIREWORK EXTRAVAGANZA. A small group of people milled around the big truck's open hood.

Chuck put his keys in his pocket and headed toward them.

"Having some trouble?" he asked as he approached. One of the people looked up at him. Chuck raised his eyebrows. The man looked like Tony Randall in *The Seven Faces of Dr. Lao*, or Hop Sing on *Bonanza*, complete with a wide-sleeved, brocade jacket and a queue.

"Honorable sir --" he began, his accent thick.

"Oh, for chrissakes, drop the act, Dad," one of the other members of the group interrupted. "We don't have time for this crap."

The old man turned and looked at the younger man, then back to Chuck. "Look, our truck broke down." His accent had disappeared, and he sounded like any other coastal California native. "We've got to get to Santa Cruz for the rest of the season. Can you help us out?"

Chuck looked at the truck. A Datsun flatbed had been retrofitted with a box on the back. "That thing's not under warranty any more, is it?" Chuck asked, noting that bailing wire strained to hold on the front bumper.

They all shook their heads.

He walked around the truck, noticed a small flyer taped to the side window. He read it, his eyes going wide. WANTED: FIREWORKS APPRENTICE. MUST BE WILLING TO TAKE CHANCES. Chuck looked at the old man.

"Seeing as I gave the mechanics the day off, why don't you get it pushed up to the garage?" Chuck looked at the old truck again. "I didn't even know they imported them that long

ago.”

The group managed to push the truck up to the service bay, and Chuck helped maneuver it onto the lift. Chuck had started as a mechanic, and that had led to reselling “mechanic’s specials,” then a used car lot, and then his own dealership. Now that he stopped to ponder, rolling up his sleeves, he had enjoyed the days when his hands got dirty. It seemed like he had really earned his beer back in those days.

He looked at the engine.

“I’m going to make a pot of coffee,” Chuck said. He stepped back from under the hood, took off his jacket, and unbuttoned the sleeves of his shirt. “Then I’m going to fix your truck.”

While he worked, Chuck learned Professor Lee -- first name, Larry -- was, in fact, a third generation Californian, but the first to get into the fireworks business. His three sons and two old-school carnies made up the rest of the crew of the Fireworks Spectacular. Larry told Chuck all about the county fairs, pier-side parties, and Founder’s Day celebrations they worked.

Even through the haze of the beer he’d drunk, Chuck remembered his feelings from the night before as he had watched the fireworks from the bluffs, their bright flashes doubled in the glassy water of the Pacific. It was as if something in him switched. He began smiling and couldn’t seem to stop. The universe had handed him an opportunity. After all, it had to be some kind of Hollywood fate that, on this very day this very old Datsun would break down in front of this very dealership and this very man would be here to fix it. Destiny even, Chuck decided.

Chuck brought the truck down off the lift, started it up, and backed it out of the service bay. The seven men stood around, listening to the rumble of the old engine.

“That should get you to Salinas, at least,” Chuck told them. “But I’d hate to have it break down on you again.”

“Well, we aren’t in a position to drive off in a brand new 1977 model year truck, Chuck,” Larry said, adopting an obvious TV voice.

“I didn’t mean that.” Chuck pointed to a sign that was taped to the inside passenger window of the truck. “I meant that.”

Everyone turned to read the sign, though it was a given that they all knew what it said.

“So,” Larry began. “You want to learn the fireworks business?”

Chuck watched over Larry’s shoulders as Bob finally pulled up to start his day at work.

“Sure do and it wouldn’t hurt for you to have a mechanic on staff.” He walked to the back of the garage and returned with an old, battered metal toolbox. “I’ve even got my own tools. We could consider the price of the repairs as part of my apprenticeship.”

Larry raised his eyebrows. Bob Simmons, in his impeccable plaid suit, walked up behind Larry, his big Monday morning grin on his face. Chuck reached into his pocket and pulled out his massive ring of keys. He took one key off the ring, the key to the Mustang, and handed the rest of the ring to Bob as he came to a stop. Chuck slipped the Mustang key back into his pocket.

“Bob, look after the place for awhile.”

“What?”

“You’re ... ah ... acting manager until further notice. You need to get to work earlier.”

“Umm ... okay. Is everything all right between you and Delia?”

“I’ll call you in a few days.”

Chuck grabbed a few clean mechanics’ jumpsuits out of the break room, stuffed them into the top of his toolbox, and latched it shut.

“Whenever you’re ready,” he told the group.

“I admire your tenacity,” Larry began, “but don’t you think you are slightly over

qualified?”

Chuck took a moment to prepare his story for Larry. He didn't want to come off as too crazy, but he needed the older man to understand how much he needed to join the extravaganza. Chuck confessed his penchant for fantasy, his distracted wife, his secret car. He told Larry about his analyst and Bob and the block party the day before. Finally, Chuck tried to put into brief words the feeling of the night before. Those fireworks brought people together, inspired awe and admiration. It was as good, Chuck thought, as saving a damsel in distress or nabbing the bad guy. Larry nodded. Chuck smiled. Of course the man knew how he felt; he got to feel that every time he worked.

“You ride in the van with Gang He, then,” Larry said, tilting his chin toward one of his sons.

The son who looked the youngest leaned over to Chuck and whispered, “You'll have to cut my brother some slack. He's going through this cultural thing. His real name is Todd.”

Chuck nodded, trying not to smile. “I'd rather follow in my own car, if you don't mind.”

He picked up his toolbox and headed for the back of the dealership.

“But what about --” Bob called out as Chuck went around back to fetch his car.

“You'll do fine.” Chuck ducked around the corner, uncovered his car, and got in. The door closed, and he finally let himself smile. He drove the Mustang around to the front of the dealership and pulled in line behind one of the vans. The two carnies climbed into the old truck and pulled out to the frontage road, followed by the Lees and Chuck. The highway traffic was light; people hadn't started heading home from their Fourth celebrations yet.

Chuck guessed his Independence Day just came a little late.

The Next Wave

1996

The accountant had potential. He was a little uninspired, and a little old, but he possessed a certain spark of which Eddie approved. He took the accountant's forty dollars and walked him to his car.

"Next Thursday then, Eddie?" the accountant asked.

"Yeah." Eddie hiked up his board shorts; the elastic had gone out and the drawstring had disappeared inside the waistband, so it was only God's good will that kept them up. "Work on that riff I taught you, all right?"

"I'll practice till my fingers bleed." The accountant sounded thrilled at the idea. He threw his guitar case in the back of his very practical, very economical Japanese sedan. One tick against him, that car, Eddie told himself.

Eddie looked down at the two twenties in his hand and went to pay some of the back rent on his trailer space. On the way, he slipped one of the bills under the door of the trailer next to his. Sylvia and Zeke Ables lived there. Sylvia cleaned hotel rooms at a Super Eight on Highway One-Oh-One, and Zeke was in the sixth grade. Eddie liked to help them out when he could, which wasn't often. Sylvia cooked for him sometimes and once, after a round of chemo, had brought him home from the hospital and hadn't seemed to mind when he puked in her pick-up.

The other twenty he took the trailer park owner, who had a trailer closer to the bluff, under the shade of a eucalyptus tree. It always smelled of cat pee under there, and fallen leaves and seedpods littered the roof and porch. But, from that narrow porch along the front, the manager had a nice view of the ocean. Right now, as Eddie climbed up the three stairs to the

front door, the sun was setting in the west, reflecting off the gray waters of the Pacific. A fog bank sat far off, obstructing any view of the Channel Islands. Eddie looked at the scene for a while; it reminded him why he'd moved out to California more than thirty years before. He'd enjoyed many an evening on the porch, sitting and passing the time with the owner.

He knocked on the door, and it opened. Gloria Nakamura looked him up and down from the dim interior, and then reached out a skeletal hand. Eddie reminded himself to be nice. Sometimes, he called her "Old Glory" like the flag, and she used to think it was a cute pet name, but if she heard it now, she would probably think he was being mean. Before he'd gotten sick, they'd... Well, they had both been old and lonely.

"Hey, Glory." Eddie knew Gloria thought his illness was an excuse to end things with her. It wasn't. There really was no pressure in the pipes anymore, and they hadn't had anything else to do after that. He didn't feel much like talking, and he was pretty sure he'd heard all her stories.

"You got money for me or no?" she asked, making a clutching motion with her empty hand.

He'd exhausted her generosity, he knew; he couldn't even keep track as to how far in the rears he was as far as rent. Things like chemo drugs and weed had drained his bank account, but he did have to keep a roof over his head. Eddie handed her the twenty.

"Only twenty bucks? You been helping out Sylvia, haven't you, Eddie?"

It wasn't too much of an accusation; Eddie knew Sylvia was behind on her rent, too, and Gloria had been letting the woman slip for much longer than she had Eddie. Woman had a son, after all.

The money snaked into the trailer, and the door snapped shut after. He missed the

younger Gloria. When they'd been together -- back in the late eighties -- he'd seen glimpse of a young spirit behind her eyes. They used to have fun now and again, but not anymore.

But that was that. Given that he had no food or money, the only thing left for Eddie to do was sleep. He walked back across the trailer park, his bones aching.

Sylvia Ables arrived in her pick-up.

"Hey, Edward," she said as she climbed out, pulling after her a plastic shopping bag, heavy with something and beads of condensation lining the inside. She insisted on calling him by his full name, as if it was more respectful or something. "Hungry? I bought some tamales down the road. Let me get you some. Maybe you'll find the lucky chicken foot?" Sylvia smiled big. Despite her age and the grueling work she did, she still moved like a teenager, taking the steps to her front door two at a time. It probably helped to have a kid to keep up with, Eddie thought. Sylvia stopped when she opened the door and looked down at the floor. "Again?" She bent over and picked up the twenty Eddie had left earlier.

He heard Zeke call from inside. "Mom, that you?"

"Yeah, honey." She stepped across the threshold, and Eddie followed, unable to refuse the offer of tamales. He figured a couple tamales were fair trade for the money he'd left.

In the kitchen, Sylvia found a paper plate and placed two corn-wrapped tamales on it, handing them across the counter to Eddie. He folded the plate in half, covering the two tamales. "Thanks," he told her.

"You didn't see anyone around our door earlier, did you?" she asked.

"Nah, no one." Eddie's stomach rumbled.

"Someone keeps slipping money under the door. It's crazy."

"Wish someone would do that for me," Eddie told her, hoping it would alleviate any

suspicion in his direction.

“How are the guitar lessons going?” Sylvia pulled the rubber band out of her hair and redid her graying ponytail. The lessons had been her idea to help Eddie make a few dollars; she didn’t know his other reason for wanting to work with other guitarists.

“All right,” he told her. “Excuse me. I better get home.”

He went back to his trailer, ate the two tamales, took his *Thursday, evening* pills, and went to bed.

Eddie opened the refrigerator and looked inside... beer, half-empty can of chili with some gray mold on the lip, duck sauce packets. He took out a beer and carried it over to the small Formica counter where he popped it open, drank, opened up his box of pills, and swallowed all the ones in the compartment marked *Friday, morning*. He took another swig of beer to wash them down.

He refilled the next week’s little holes, opening the childproof medicine bottles on the shelf, cursing. The pills stuck to his finger, damp with the condensation from his beer can. When he’d finished, each caplet and lozenge nestled firmly in its place, he snapped the lid down on the box and left it on the counter. Eddie stepped out of the kitchen and into the particleboard-paneled living room.

Late morning sunlight streaked through the mostly-closed mini-blinds and glinted off the gold records that were carefully hung in regiment along the walls of the trailer. Eddie sat down in an easy chair, placed his beer on the TV tray at his right, and took a half-smoked joint from the ashtray. He briefly thought about not lighting it, given that he didn’t have anything to eat anyway. There was no way he would chance the chili, but the pain was bad. Then, of course, there was the morphine, but not a lot left. He needed to save that for later. Eddie finally lit the

joint with his Zippo and picked up the most recent issue of *Rolling Stone*. His nephew had brought it over the day before, excited by the cover and dismayed by something in the article, and promising he'd already fixed it.

Eddie sighed, looking at the cover. Standing on a surfboard, a bandana wrapped around his head and a guitar slung around his shoulder, was Dick Dale, along with huge, bubble font letters proclaiming "*The Rebirth of Surf Rock*." Eddie turned to the feature article. He skimmed it.

Among the forefront of the movement were Dick Dale, the Ventures, and guitar virtuoso Eddie Paretti. Paretti died ten years ago in a boating accident off the coast of Baja California. This revival will certainly miss him.

Eddie's jaw dropped. He hadn't even been in Baja in the eighties. He'd been in Mazatlan, clear on the other side of the Sea of Cortez, living in a beachfront trailer park in an Airstream his old drummer, who'd invested in a Honda dealership and did pretty well, had moved down there for him. Eddie had been on a boat, one time, fishing for marlin, and someone had gone overboard, pulled off the ship by an aggressive fish he'd caught, but it had been the skipper, not Eddie, and they'd recovered him easily enough.

Wouldn't you know that his actual death and the resurgence of surf rock would come at the same time? Here he was, dying in this God-forsaken trailer, barely able to pay for his medication, and Dick Dale was playing *The Tonight Show*. "Misirlou" was all over the radio again, thanks to that stupid movie that came out last fall. The one with Bruce Willis and that disco dancer that used to be on *Welcome Back, Kotter*. *Pulp* something... Eddie had met him once, back in the seventies, when he'd still been able to get into the good restaurants in Hollywood.

Fuck Dick Dale and that Travolta clown, Eddie thought, remembering the name and taking a drag off the joint. His eyes wandered over to his quiver of guitars, leaning against the far wall, away from the sunlight and the kitchen. They were all there: Danelectro, Rickenbacker, Gibson, and his old Fender amp, the kind they didn't make anymore. His nephew, something of a fan (he must have called *Rolling Stone* to get some kind of correction, the little suck-up), had tried to convince Eddie that he owned a small fortune in electric guitars and, with his provenance, could sell them at auction, along with all the gold records, and have enough to live comfortably until the cancer had its way. Eddie couldn't deny the fact that, with the recent uptick in surf-rock enthusiasm, he might have food in his refrigerator right now and enough morphine to get him through the weekend, if he did sell the guitars.

Fuck my nephew, Eddie thought. Those guitars, sitting there in their old, hard-shell cases, had a greater purpose, Eddie reminded himself, one that his analytical son-of-a-bitch nephew would never understand. He hoped maybe the accountant would.

A Brooklyn boy earning his chops playing hotel swing bands in the Poconos before coming out to California in the sixties, Eddie had been driven and dedicated. It was there, on the sandy beaches of Los Angeles, among the wool sweater-clad, first generation howlie board riders, that he'd found his passion: surf rock. And it wasn't that syrupy, Mouseketeers crap they got back on the East Coast. Oh, no. This was different, raw, with the brass of Tijuana in the back and guitar work that would make a blues man cry.

Eddie had been good at it. Hell, he had been the best. Even the article called him a virtuoso. Eddie remembered what it had felt like to be *that good*. He'd had fans and shiny cars, but it wasn't even about that. When he used to play, when he was really good, it was like fucking God himself worked through Eddie's fingers, like he could heal the sick and solve the world's

problems through his music. He never had, of course, but the potential alone, that he could if he wanted to, was the best high he'd ever had. He didn't want that feeling to die with him. Eddie intended to pass on everything he knew to the right kid or mid-life-crisis-suffering number cruncher.

Eddie may not have earned a place in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (he figured they'd lost his phone number), but he could give someone else that feeling that he had known, of being great. He knew his talent couldn't die with him, which it was threatening to do, and none of his albums had been re-released on compact disc. Therefore, everything, every riff and run, had to be painstakingly taught to someone, and only Eddie could do it. It was just a matter of finding the right student.

And Eddie was very much beginning to fucking panic. He didn't know how much time he had left. God knew he didn't take very good care of himself, and every day the pain in his groin seemed to creep a little more to the right, to the left, and up into his guts, like he could feel the cancer eating away at him bit by bit.

Eddie traded the magazine for the Friday paper. The front page was still plastered with rumors about the bombing in Oklahoma City a couple of months earlier. But, on the positive side, they'd recovered that pilot who was shot down over Bosnia. After glancing at the first page, Eddie went to the lifestyles section. He ripped out the music listings for the evening and scanned them, setting the joint down in the ashtray and taking up a red ballpoint pen. It didn't matter if the yet-to-be-discovered kid was already interested in the right kind of music, just that he (or she, Eddie reminded himself grudgingly; it was the nineties after all) had heart. He hadn't seen that yet. Just the little spark in that accountant.

His eyes drifted over the listings

Seen them. Eddie drew an X over one listing.

Heard them on the radio. Another X.

Watched them on Good Morning Los Angeles. *The guitarist sucked.*

One by one, the listings were narrowed down to three. Eddie folded the paper neatly and stuck it away in the pocket of his faded blue jeans.

It was going to be another long night.

Eddie thought again about the can of chili.

“Mr. Paretti!”

Eddie ran a hand over his thinning, gray pompadour, patting it into shape, and turned with a forced smile to Zeke.

“Look what I found in a pile of trash in that vacant lot!” Zeke held up a pristine copy of Eddie Paretti and the Wedge’s *Summer of Surf*. “I got it on my way home from school.” He scratched aimlessly at a scabby knee through a hole in his khakis.

Eddie’s smile fell from his face like a cartoon character that had just discovered it had run off a cliff. The knuckles of his hand, gripping the handle of his car door, went white. “Don’t show me that shit, kid.” He tried to be calm. It wasn’t the kid that threw it away after all. He had been the one to rescue it; Eddie couldn’t blame him for someone else’s bad decision.

“That’s you, right there.” Zeke pointed to Eddie’s photo on the cover. His pompadour was a rich, glossy black back then, and his red velvet tux jacket fitted him perfectly. The same silk flower lei he was wearing in the picture now hung from the rear-view mirror of his ’68 Continental, faded, frayed, and dusty. “Can you sign it for me, Mr. Paretti?”

“Why? You want to auction it off, too?” Eddie immediately regretted his words. The kid

meant well, and it felt nice to have a little worship left for him in the world.

Zeke's face scrunched up, and he cocked his head to one side "What?"

"Never mind." Eddie turned and opened the car door. "I've got to roll, kid. Your mom home?"

Zeke shook his head.

"Well, tell her thanks for the tamales. I'll catch you later." Eddie slid into the seat, an assortment of old beach towels covering up the ripped upholstery and exposed springs. He had bought it new, promising to keep it pristine, but, like it had with him, time had caught up to the car, leaving it little more than a rolling wreck.

Eddie fumbled with the key and finally got it into the ignition. After a few cranks, the old 462 turned over and a cloud of black smoke belched out the exhaust. Zeke stuck his head through the broken passenger side window. The kid didn't even have to duck to get it in; he was pretty small for his age

"My mom still has a turntable that works. I'm going to listen to this."

"Good for you."

"Where you headed, Mr. Paretti?"

"Venice Beach."

"Going to see some more bands?"

"Yeah."

"Cool."

Without another word, Eddie shifted his car into drive and pulled away. He watched Zeke in the background, waving the album in farewell. Poor kid.

The drive down the coast from Oxnard was about as bad as it could have been:

weekenders heading to the city for culture, Volkswagen vans packed with surfboards just in time for the late-evening glass-off, and producers cruising to their Malibu beach houses. Eddie listened to an old Willie Nelson tape in the eight track as he tried to keep his temper.

At a red light, with the sun setting over the Pacific and turning the Santa Monica beachfront orange, Eddie reached a hand into his jeans and fished out the listings. The first gig was at a skate shop a few blocks back from Venice Beach. He cruised through Santa Monica into Venice and found a parking spot large enough for his car on a quiet side street. He opened his glove compartment and took out a syringe and small bottle of morphine. After filling the barrel, he tapped the air to the top, expelled it from the needle, then, unhesitatingly, jabbed the needle into his thigh through a hole in his jeans.

Eddie's clenched jaw began to relax as the morphine took effect. Maybe the evening wouldn't be so bad after all. He threw the vial and syringe back into the glove compartment and opened the door of the car. He stood shakily, smiling to himself, and slammed the door of the Lincoln. Eddie glanced up and down the street before heading toward the main drag; he realized the keys still swung in the ignition. He thought about turning around to fetch them. Ah, fuck it.

As Eddie turned the corner onto Main Street, he could hear the music coming from the skate shop ahead of him. It was the modern mix of punk and reggae that the Long Beach crowd liked. Harsh power chords chopped over a reggae drumbeat. A few teenagers loitered on the sidewalk out front, smoking cigarettes and showing off on their skateboards.

"Hey, graybeard," one of them called out as Eddie approached. "Spare a cigarette?"

"Back off, grommet," Eddie replied as he pushed past into the crowded shop.

"Fascist!" the kid called after him.

The organizer of the show had shoved a makeshift stage, a few pallets topped with some

sheets of plywood, against the back of the store. It supported three kids, none of whom could have been more than sixteen. A girl with lanky brown hair plucked the bass while a pimply-faced boy tried his best to play a kit made up of a bass drum, high-hat, and snare. For a white kid his age to be able to even attempt the rhythms he was playing was impressive, but Eddie didn't care much about the drummer or the bass player. He was there for the front man, or boy as it were.

The kid picked at a new Fender already covered in decals while reciting some garbled lyrics into the microphone. He seemed to have technical merit, probably lessons from some old session musician, but lacked any kind of passion. Another example of some bored, suburban kid playing to annoy his neighbors in Encino, under the strict supervision of Mom who tried desperately to be cool and hang onto her youth through her baby. Eddie spotted a Mom candidate in the crowd, standing beside the stage in her designer jogging suit and holding a huge designer bag, nodding her head up and down with the music as if she had palsy. A huge grin plastered across her face. Every once in awhile, she would turn her head, left then right, looking to the others in the crowd for acknowledgement that, yes, her baby was talented and wasn't she the coolest mom ever?

Eddie shook his head. Another failed attempt. It seemed like he had been searching forever now. He couldn't remember if it had only been weeks or years; in reality, it could have only been a couple of months, since he'd gotten his diagnosis and his prognosis (a year...two at the most). None of these kids had the passion that he needed to harness.

Eddie wanted desperately to take a leak, but he knew that would be a lost cause. He decided instead to get out of the close air of the shop and find the next gig that he knew, was sure down to his cancer-ridden bones, would be another utter failure.

It turned out he was right. The other two bands, almost identical in the sterile attack of

their music, had uninspired guitarists, both in their twenties and obviously stuck in their ways.

Eddie had done everything to try to find the protégé he needed; he'd even bought an advertisement in a newspaper. *Wanted: one guitar prodigy to learn surf rock from the greatest to ever play. Must have passion, dedication, and a tube amp.* He had put up a flyer at the local pizza place, a well-known hangout for young surfers, but so far the only interested party had been the accountant.

Eddie drove into the trailer park around midnight, parking the Continental in front of his trailer, where it shuddered and sputtered to a tired and permanent-sounding stop.

Zeke's mom had pulled her own rusty Datsun truck up to their front door. Their TV was perched on the small landing in front of the doorway of the trailer. Zeke sat in the cab of the truck, eating microwave popcorn and watching a cheesy surfer romance movie from the 1980's. Boy comes to sleepy beach town, boy discovers wonders of surfing, boy meets girl, girl's surf Nazi ex-boyfriend threatens boy, boy wins surf contest and girl after several touching mishaps and one thorough beating.

Eddie knew Zeke didn't even have a surfboard, but he was obsessed with the beach culture most of his classmates could afford. Once, Zeke had told Eddie that he had discovered a boogie board, covered in tar and kelp, on the beach down the road from their trailer park. He'd dragged it back and cleaned it up, carefully scraping off all the tar. Eddie had watched him go about it from the steps of his own trailer. The first time he got it down to the ocean, some bigger kid shoved him into the surf and stole it.

Eddie shambled over to the Datsun and looked in at Zeke. "What's going on, kid?"

"I got straight A's, so I get to go to the drive-in." Zeke munched another handful of popcorn and reached for his can of generic orange soda on the dash. He took a swig and smiled

at Eddie. “This is my favorite movie. Isn’t it great that it was on TV tonight?”

Eddie nodded. “I don’t really *do* movies.” Eddie’d given Zeke’s mom that TV a few weeks earlier, when he’d decided the kid needed it more than he did. Now Eddie wished he’d saved it; he could have pawned the set for beer and pot. “You listen to that record you found?”

“Oh, yeah.” Zeke dropped his bag of popcorn on the seat and performed some air guitar riffs while making the corresponding, “Na na na wee na na” around a mouthful of popcorn.

Eddie raised his eyebrows. “How many times you listen to that cut?” he asked. It was “Mars Beach Mambo.”

“Just once.”

“Huh.” Eddie turned away and headed into his trailer, sitting back down in the easy chair and lighting up his joint. He looked at the gold records on the wall, then at his aging, liver-spotted hands. With the joint between his lips, he got up and opened the case of his favorite guitar, the Rickenbacker 381. He slung the strap over his shoulders and tried to play “Mars Beach Mambo.” Halfway through, he gave up, the joints of his hands sore. Just arthritis, he told himself. He decided to take a walk.

He slowly headed back across the lot toward the bluff. He stood there for awhile, looking down on the narrow strip of beach, the dark ocean. Eddie had no children, had sponsored no foundation, and had no star on Sunset. All he possessed were those trinkets hanging back on his trailer walls; those, his legacy, his fucking meaningless gold records.

Eddie could tell, by the way his whole body seemed to throb, that his end was near. Time was running away from him, leaving him with nothing. How many months did he have left now? Six? Maybe eight? Every day seemed like a struggle, from his fight to get out of bed, to his fight to swallow each dry mouthful of pills. Did he really want to spend the few remaining days he

had on Earth trying to straighten out some teenybopper who'd been listening to too much Guns and Roses? Fuck no, he did not. He wanted to drink and slip silently into his sullen oblivion.

“What you doing out here, Eddie?”

Eddie turned from pondering the ocean and saw Gloria walking toward him. She wore a man's corduroy robe and flip-flops. Stopping beside him, she pondered the same ocean for a moment, then looked him in the eyes.

“I don't really know,” Eddie replied, breaking the gaze and looking back at the water. “I feel it sneaking up on me. Death, you know? And I...”

He'd never really told her about the band, about that feeling of triumph and his desire to pass it on.

“Life is suffering,” Gloria told him. “You should have learned that by now.”

Eddie was fucked if that's all the Buddhist wisdom she could come up with, but it made sense.

The moon was high early that Saturday morning as Eddie hauled his guitars, one by one, out of the trailer. He'd given up, but wouldn't give his nephew the satisfaction of capitalizing on his failure. It took him four trips, laboring across the square of the trailer park, to move his quiver and his amp to the trash pile in the vacant lot. In between trips, he drank beer and shot up the rest of his morphine, nodding off sporadically in his chair.

By the time he was done, the moon had traveled toward the west, and the sun's aura chased it, turning the inky sky to the east pink. He looked at the pile of cases and his amp in the growing light. Their presence atop the existing trash resembled a boulder, the Rickenbacker in its monogrammed case jutting from the top, wedged between the lesser guitars and the bulk of the

old amp. It stood there, erect, the neck pointing to the sky. It reminded Eddie of something, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

Behind, silhouetting the case against the sky, the sun rose. Eddie wiped his hands down the thighs of his jeans and sighed. He might as well have died like that article said. His quest had failed, his months of searching, fruitless. He decided he wouldn't waste the rest of his days worrying about what may have been. On Thursday, when the accountant came, Eddie would give him the card of a very competent session musician he knew that gave very professional lessons and send the number cruncher on his way.

But now there would be no regent of rock, he reminded himself, something of an internal argument going on between the dying, old man part of him and the rock star part of him.

Fuck it, he replied.

Eddie stumbled the few yards back to his trailer, looked around the base of his Webber for a can of lighter fluid, but couldn't find one. He walked over to Sylvia's trailer and found one there, hoping she wouldn't mind if he purloined it. Then, he returned to the pile. He doused it down with the entire can and pulled his Zippo out of his jean's pocket.

One... two... three...

Eddie thumbed it again, and still it would not light. He shook his head in exasperation, dropped the lighter where he stood, then staggered back to his trailer. Eddie entered and fell onto his bed, fully clothed, his meds for the evening and morning ignored. What difference would it make, really, in the long run when the long run was only a matter of a few extra days?

Eddie woke to a ray of sunlight streaking through the mini-blinds, training on his eye and piercing through the closed lid. Then sound broke through the walls around him like "Reverie"

played on Joshua's horn. It was like Gabriel's horn. It was like the very voice of fucking God welcoming him home to Paradise.

Somebody was running sloppy riffs up and down the neck of a Rickenbacker 381 (*his* Rickenbacker) through an old tube amp (*his* old tube amp; there was no doubting that). There was no technical merit to the sound, but there was an earnestness to it that brought a tear to Eddie's eye and smile to his chapped lips.

He sat up, his aching body, rotten, protesting every move. Eddie stood and moved slowly to the window. He jabbed a finger into the blinds, lifted one and peered through.

A small expanse of brown grass stretched from beneath Eddie's window to the next trailer. Zeke's trailer. There, sitting on the steps leading up to the front door, sat Zeke, Eddie's old Rickenbacker in his lap, his fingers flying up and down the neck.

Eddie's jaw dropped. He pulled back from the window, his breath coming in ragged gasps. He moved quickly out of the bedroom and into his kitchen. The pillbox sat on the counter and, not thinking about potential consequences, Eddie doubled up his pills, chasing them down with most of his last beer. He had a reason now. That kid. Shit, he should have seen it before. Had he been fucking blind?

Eddie left the trailer and crossed over to where Zeke sat. Eddie watched the kid, sipping at the rest of his beer as he listened. Zeke was small, yeah, the guitar very nearly longer than he was tall, and he was pale. He'd never be some kind of surf god, but he could be a great front man. All that mattered was heart when it came to being a front man, and Zeke had it coming out of his ears.

Zeke finally stopped and looked up at Eddie.

"Hey, Mr. Paretti. Can you believe I found this stuff in the lot? It took me awhile to pull

this one of the pile. I watched some other kids try. They were bigger than me, but they couldn't do it, and they gave up. And this amp was real heavy."

"Yeah, I know." Eddie sighed. "You cleaned it all up, didn't you?"

Zeke nodded.

"Did you grab the other guitars, too? Get me one of them."

Zeke set the Rickenbacker down on the landing and went inside, returning momentarily with the Danelectro. He handed Eddie the guitar with reverence, and Eddie slung the strap over his shoulder.

"All right, kid. You listen, and you listen good. I am only going to say this once." Eddie stopped and looked into Zeke's eyes. Why had it taken so long to come to him? Eddie adjusted the strap. "You need to start at the beginning. Basic scales and tuning, that sort of thing. Later, chords. Then, and only then, can we start working on lead. It's going to take a long time..."

Maybe too long "But you should be pretty good one day, if you're willing to practice."

Zeke's mom pulled up in her Datsun and climbed out of the cab, a bag of groceries on her hip.

"Hey, Edward," she said as she stepped up the stairs, over Zeke and his assortment of cables.

"Good afternoon, Sylvia," Eddie replied. She stopped in the doorway and turned, flashing Eddie an earnest, if slightly nicotine-yellowed, smile. For a moment, in that smile, Eddie saw all those girls he'd entertained decades before.

"Eddie says I'm gonna be good, Mom," Zeke told her.

"Well, just so long as you don't get any ideas. Don't forget, your momma is trailer trash, your granddaddy is trailer trash, and by God, you should be too."

She smiled and winked, and Zeke clearly got the joke. Eddie had met Sylvia's father, Caleb Ables, when he came to visit; the old bastard sure enough lived in a trailer in Bakersfield. He said this spot was a lot nicer.

"I got some minute steaks at the store. They expire tomorrow, so we've got to cook them up tonight. You want one?"

Eddie couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten a steak, even one slightly past its prime. "That'd be great." He smiled back at her then at Zeke as Zeke picked out a perfect scale up the neck of his Rickenbacker.

Vita

Corina Bittleston Calsing was born on a stormy December night near the shores of the Pacific Ocean. She was raised in San Luis Obispo, California. In that town, she also earned her AA at Cuesta Community College, her BA in English from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, and her teaching credential. In 2002, she escaped to the urban fantasy of New Orleans, and she has lived there ever since. Work on her master's degree began in 2006 and was completed in 2009.