

# **The Dream Trip**

**by Jay Hodgkins**

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## Prologue - People Try to Put Us D-Down (Talkin' Bout My Generation)

Lines between generations are as grey as they are fuzzy, but the societal elders who decide such things seem to agree that somewhere in the realm of 1980 to 1982 marked the first breaths of the most divisive generation alive today. The Millennials – a generation loved or hated and seemingly nothing in between; a strange hive now growing into new skin as the cultural flag bearers of America.

The name callers call them so many things. Generation Y (lacks creativity, no?). Generation Me because they might just be narcissistic. Generation Flux because of how they are adjusting to the very order of human life and relationships in an era of unprecedented technological acceleration. Generation We, Generation Next and the Global Generation because it sounds good when trying to sell them soda. Echo Boom because of their number, an echo of their parents' generational bloat. Peter Pan generation because of their tendency to delay life's rites of passage – moving out of their parents' houses, marriage, child rearing and so on. But Millennial is by far the most intelligent. It's the one that doesn't come preloaded with assumptions about what the generation is or will be. It simply says these are the kids who grew up around the turn of the millennia. Fair enough.

Of the 3.7 million babies born in 1982, one was named Arthur Benjamin Casey and another Amelia Isabelle Rotterdam. On Dec. 31, 1982, Baby Art was at home in an *E.T.* onesie (a silhouetted *E.T.* sits up in a vintage baby carriage backlit by a giant moon as it flies through the air). Mom and Dad are debating the best movies of the year at their first home, a two-bedroom rancher in Bozeman, Montana. Boy, was 1982 ever a good one for movies. *E.T.*, *Blade Runner*, *First Blood* and *Conan the Barbarian* (marking the rise of the '80s muscle-bound action hero flick), *Poltergeist*, *TRON*, *Gandhi*, *Sophie's Choice*, *The Dark Crystal*, *The Secret of NYMH*, and perhaps most importantly *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. Why most importantly? Because its original audience thought it was just a film about nothing, but posterity would recognize *Fast Times*' true legacy: the fact it was about nothing is exactly why it stood for something. This ode to the

banality of adolescence was one of the great time capsules sent from the '80s to its children to be opened and understood when they were adults. There may be no greater contributors to the shape of the Millennial Generation than Sean Penn and Judge Reinhold, or the likes of John Cusack, Molly Ringwald, Judd Nelson, Bill Murray and Anthony Michael Hall in other defining '80s culture flicks. With their wry takes on the cultural and societal failings of the 1980s, they were a salve for wounds already inflicted on the youth of that era. But for the Millennials to come, they provided answers in advance to many of the trickiest questions on the Big Test known as life.

Art was his mother and father's first child. They'd have three more sons. But on New Year's Eve 1982, Art was the only apple in their eye. They agreed they just wanted him to be happy, no matter what that meant. They wanted him to know it was OK to be whatever he wanted to be. That they would love him no matter what. These broad statements were charged by a resentment they felt but never recognized toward their own parents, who pushed them to be exactly this and do it exactly that way because this and that were the right way to do things. "You can be anything" is a watery platitude, but saying it felt like more to young Mr. and Mrs. Casey in 1982. Those words formed a philosophical foundation that guided Art as he grew, even when his parents fell victim to the temptations of competitive child rearing, pushing their son to achieve more more more. But Art felt what was underneath. The difference was subtle, but the billions of invisible antennae blessed to every child received their true message. And he had Judge Reinhold to guide him on VHS.

On that very same night, Amelia's parents left her with her big sister and a teenage babysitter, a kooky Gen Xer who watched Mel Brooks' *History of the World Part 1*. Her mom and dad took the train from northern New Jersey into Manhattan for dinner and champagne in Midtown before catching a show in the Theater District. Witnessing the homeless epidemic in Midtown, they would opine that the mayor should build a wall separating places like the Village, Meat Packing District, Chelsea and their ilk from the parts of Manhattan still worth a damn.

Because, obviously, those neighborhoods would never be salvaged. There was no return ticket from going to hell in a hand basket. They discussed the miserable pop-culture state of film in 1982 and how theater was the only acceptable form of acting left to the world, TV having been a pit of filth since cable. *Cheers* started that year, the bawdy drunks toasting the end of good taste on the networks. They discussed how the baby would be just like her oldest sister – be taught a second language from birth by her au pair, go to the most elite girl’s school and, eventually, a top university. She’d have two weeks each summer to be a little girl at a camp somewhere in Vermont. They planned this rigid regimen not so that the new world of opportunities open to women would be within her grasp. No, indeed. It was so she could be best prepared to raise her own elite children and capably manage her household after marrying a man with status and potential.

On New Year’s Eve exactly 22 years later, Art and Amelia were married in Chicago not long after graduating from Northwestern (Amelia, with honors; Art, with \$127,496.27 of federal student loan debt)

Exactly 31 years, five months and one day later, Art and Amelia left their home, their life, their income and everything behind in Billings, Montana, to do something reckless, something they hoped might save their marriage.

## Chapter 1 – Going Off the Rails

“How long has this been going on?”

Art’s coworkers had decided to send for help. Naturally, they went to the head of Human Resources. Vicki Thorpe is not a psychologist or a life counselor. She’s not even first aid certified. But in the face of a potential medical emergency, Art’s boss went to Vicki because A) it was the lowest risk course of action and B) corporate jobs are where very smart people go to become very stupid.

“No one knows,” Tom said. “Nobody remembers him saying a word this morning, but that’s normal. After a while, we just thought he was giving us the silent treatment.”

It was 3 p.m. At 8:56 a.m., Art marched in to work without a word, sat down, turned on his computer and commenced to stare at the screen with his hands folded in his lap. Motionless silence since. As he was leaving the house that morning, Amelia announced that after nine-plus years of marriage, she was leaving him. I don’t want to, she said. I love you, she said. We haven’t been happy in so long and you’ve given me no choice, she said. She cried, she ranted, she begged him to give her a reason to stay, all while Art stood by silently. When she finished, Art hesitated a moment then responded “Love you, bye,” like he did every morning. He picked up his briefcase from next to the umbrella stand, walked out the door of their 2,400-square-foot, four bed, three bath Mountain Dream-model home nestled on a ridge with panoramic views of the Montana landscape, put the key in the ignition, and drove the concrete expanse of Interstate 90 to the corporate headquarters of Northwest Mountain Insurance Co. in Billings. Art was not aware that Amelia’s announcement triggered a panic attack that had been ongoing from the moment his mind processed “I’m leaving you.”

“Art. You there buddy?” Vicki snapped her fingers in front of his face. He didn’t even blink. He stared at the little screen saver picture of Amelia hugging him on the Jersey Shore boardwalk the summer before Hurricane Sandy destroyed it. It bounced around the edges of his computer like the ball in a game of Pong. The rest of the world was black, a void. Basically, he

was freaking out, man. His heart was thrumming like a bird's and had started skipping beats, scattered moments of oxygen-deprived terror that entrenched his paralysis. It had been working at over 100 beats per minute for nearly seven hours, well above Art's normal resting heart rate. Slight trembling and droplets of sweat on his brow were the only outward signs. Inside was much worse. His chest felt tight. He felt like his throat had almost closed up. Then, the picture of him and Amelia became fuzzy as he felt something from the outside world for the first time all day.

"Art, snap out of it. Come on. You're scaring everyone." Vicki shook his shoulder, gently for a moment before really rattling his cage with the full force of her doughy, overweight, white collar body. Her skin smelled like 1988.

"Maybe we should call a doctor, Vicki."

"This might be serious."

"He looks pale. He might be having a stroke or something."

"See, Art, you're scaring everyone," Vicki said. "You're not being a good teammate."

Art turned his head and stared directly into Vicki's grey eyes.

"There you go. Now what's this all about, Art?"

"I can't breathe," Art said. "I can't breathe."

He kicked out of his chair, knocking Vicki and another coworker crowding his chair aside. He ripped off his Q\*bert 3D pyramid tie then tore open his Pierre Cardin business shirt from T.J.Maxx, launching cheap plastic buttons that plinked across his neighbors' desks. He wasn't wearing an undershirt and his hairy gut wobbled over his belt. Quite a crowd had gathered by that point. The more courteous now had the decency to avert their eyes. But for every one of those, three new gawkers would happen to stroll by to watch the train wreck unfold. They stared at him like an animal in the zoo.

Art started making a noise. A horrible noise. Not a scream or a cry or a whimper. Something long and low and pathetic. Pathetic in action as a verb. He patheticked a terrible, mournful noise.

Art swirled around, not looking at anyone, but looking for something. He saw the plastic five-foot-tall palmetto that had been stationed behind his cubicle since the day he started at NoMo Insurance almost eight years ago. He grabbed it, pulled it to his soft, pale chest. He clung to it as he started to climb onto his desk, but the pot was too heavy. Art alternated trying to get himself and the tree on top of the desk, but failed either way. On each attempt, his belly fat formed a long line across his stomach in the shape of a smile. His two nipples were like large pink eyes. The smiley face beamed at the onlookers with an impassive gaze. Tom was so embarrassed for Art, he stepped forward to help him lift the plastic palmetto onto the desk.

“Tom, please. Don’t. That’s not helping,” Vicki said.

Art still couldn’t hear anything. He sat down on the large pot on top of the desk, wrapped his legs around the synthetic trunk and patheticked that terrible, mournful noise again.

When Art wouldn’t stop, Vicki relented and called an ambulance. It was only Tom who thought to call Amelia. Most of the NoMo employees didn’t even realize Art was married, but Tom was an old timer who remembered when Art used to show up with Amelia on his arm at company get-togethers. The EMTs moved Art onto a stretcher and Tom patted his shoulder, assuring him Amelia was on her way back. Apparently, she had already made it to South Dakota.

The 30 days after Amelia’s announcement, after Art’s breakdown, were bad. Bad for Art. Bad for Amelia. But bad was at least a change. One day before it all, Art could have said he felt nothing about everything. Amelia suffered from depression, but Art didn’t feel strongly enough about anything to bother getting depressed by it. The prospect of divorce took care of that, a defibrillator to the chest that jolted his emotional nervous system back to life. From that point, Art knew fear. Fear of Amelia leaving in the middle of the night. Fear that she had only changed her mind about staying because she worried he was dangerous to himself.

He laid in bed often that cold month of May as spring slowly unfurled outside, fretting over why she wanted to leave – was it his weight, his balding head or just another irrational, unjustifiable decision retched out of her ongoing depression? Art couldn't ask Amelia why, though. That would be too dangerous. Everything, *everything*, had to be focused on the positive, on showing her the bright side of Art. No room for negatives. Those would chase her away, he thought. They would do in his fragile psyche, he knew.

It was in bed, late one sleepless night that Art dreamt up the road trip. It sounded romantic; at least, he hoped it would to Amelia. In truth, it was a way Art could trap her long enough to impress her and make her forget the answer to the question that he was too scared to ask. It was a last ditch effort to save their marriage, some Hail Mary across the Wild West to rediscover why they got married in the first place. Art couldn't say why she said yes, especially not so soon after trying to leave. But she did. Maybe because she still had hope. That was the answer Art wanted because hope is limitless in the right conditions, even for a festering marriage with an infection deep in the bloodstream.

## Chapter 2 - Glacier National Park

Amelia: a fat housewife eating whole bags of Peppridge Farm Montauks on the sofa because she doesn't have needy children to properly motivate her?

Not in this life. Amelia would never stand for it. She wouldn't stand for depression, either. She attacked it with hostility wholly unbecoming of a lady. She kick boxed it, Zumba'd it, Pilates'd it, tried to sweat it out and contort it into submission at hot yoga, purged it with weeklong lemon juice and cayenne pepper cleanses, ran away from it with sub-20 minute 5ks, scaled mountains to escape it. The problem is it just wouldn't go away. It undercut the strength of her petite sinewy body and dulled the intensity of her dark brown eyes because it didn't respond to brute force and conventional willpower the way Amelia believed it should.

"I'm glad we're doing this, Art. Seeing so many places and friends will be ... productive ... for me." Amelia was always focused on productivity. Every decision needed to be productive for her or Art or them. Every task's usefulness was measured by Amelia's secret formula for productivity.

Art and Amelia were up at dawn the first morning of June to kick off the trip. That Amelia had agreed to the trip seemed less like a second chance than a holy miracle to Art. He was perhaps the only person more surprised than Amelia that she agreed to it.

By the time their faded cherry red 1997 Volkswagen Cabrio began slowly ascending and descending the impossible twists of U.S. 2 and 89 along Glacier National Park's eastern border, the sun was high overhead illuminating breathtaking scenery – rushing glacial whiteblue waters of the Middle Fork River then the stark, rocky snow-dotted peaks looming over an endless valley of forest green and lake blue. They had lived in Montana more than eight years and never once managed to make it to the state's vaunted gem.

"Look, there it is! Chief Mountain. That has to be it," Amelia said. After two hours of rugged mountains that were more or less matching links in a chain, Chief Mountain was a different beast when its head poked out from behind the other slopes. The top of the slope was

capped with a massive column of rock that bore more than an abstract resemblance to the stern square face of the Blackfeet Indians who once called the park lands home. A small parking lot near the base of the mountain, just a few meters from the Canada border, was their entry point into Glacier.

“Howdy Chief,” Art said. “Damn, he’s a big boy.”

“Don’t talk about him like that, Art. I can feel his spirit here. This is a sacred place.”

Art felt his heart speed up, a little murmur and a skip with a twinge of anxiety. He didn’t want to roll the dice so he assumed she was serious and kept his mouth shut. Everything has to be perfect, he thought. Just do what it takes to keep her. Say what she wants to hear.

The full splendor of the setting revealed itself two miles from the parking lot when Art and Amelia hiked out of a thick forest into a vast meadow. Epic was the only word that came to mind as they surveyed the 10,000-foot rocky peaks towering over them in three directions, split by a deep Y-shaped valley and the winding glacier-fed Belly River. The snaking Belly shimmered to the west, as hauntingly blue as the glacial ice that fed it. Small stands of birch and pines dotted the landscape, looking like row houses for bears. But above all, the mountains loomed. They pressed impossibly close, dominating the landscape, a constant backdrop of black rock and thick veins of shining white snowpack not yet melted by the early June sun. They were fierce, steep, imposing edifices.

Spring had sprung along the Belly River Trail and all life with it. Small groups of hikers beat their way merrily down the trail while their wearied mirror images streamed back toward the parking lot.

The deep-cut, narrow valley was its own micro-climate. It was a cloudless day in the parking lot, but old clouds stuck in the valley found it no easier to scale the steep cliffs than an average mountain climber. The effect was intermittent patches of fog and mist, all breaking off of a massive cloud a few miles to the west stuck against a towering wall of rock hidden behind it. Checkerboard squares of light and shadow on the meadow floor turned the vibrant patchwork

quilt of wildflowers on and off like Christmas lights. When the sun found a patch of earth muted in shadow, it would ignite the flaming orange and red of Indian's paint brush, the white domes of bear grass, golden balsam root like little sunflowers, and too many pink and purple varieties to count.

The nine-mile hike to their small backcountry campsite melted away – in and out of meadow and forest, past turgid river rapids roiling with snow melt, over swinging bridges framed by the backdrop of misty waterfalls illuminated in refracted rainbow light – until a thick wood opened up to reveal the smooth glass surface of a large lake. It reflected without flaw the towering rocky peaks that hugged its shores on three sides. The trail arced around the lake shore, which had a beach of small, smooth stones alternately turquoise and fire red. Art picked up a blue one and flicked it across the surface, watching it skip seven times before it sank into the pristine water.

Three of the six tent sites at the foot of the lake held stunning views of the water and the mountains that lorded over it. Art and Amelia were the first campers at the site and had their pick, setting up their tent then stowing their backpacks and food in one of the metal bear lockers. Art extracted a collapsible kid's fishing pole from his pack and they wasted away the bright, cool afternoon digging for grubs and worms. They traded the pole every few casts angling for trout. The lake was so full, they actually managed to hook a couple despite going about it like rookies. They were too scared to keep their catch for dinner, given that even a fleck of fish guts on a pocket knife could be a grizzly bear magnet.

Strolling back to the site late that evening, they found their secluded backcountry camp had turned into a beach party on the lake shore. Every tent site was booked for the night and there appeared to be perfect attendance in the shared area around the fire pit.

A pack of six girls Art initially took as middle schoolers (actually, rising college sophomores at Montana St.) laid claim to three of the sites. First impression aside, these giggling teenagers came seriously prepared and were much more credible backpackers than Art and

Amelia. Crampons dangled off their packs, which they had to explain to Art were spiked snow shoes to get them up over snowed-in Logan Pass. The girls were celebrating their first year of college together by hiking the width of Glacier.

They looked like a rainbow sherbet, standing side-by-side in color-coordinated, identical mummy jackets – Dreamsicle orange, lavender, soft pink, baby blue, lime green and white.

The remaining two at the site would, at that moment, have described themselves as the luckiest two men on the planet. A pair of recent Princeton grads embarking on the first day of their quest to hike the Continental Divide Trail from the Canadian to the Mexican border. Clearly, they were certain the backpacking gods smiled upon their journey with this offering of a kaleidoscope of college cuties. Art caught them doing something like a rain dance, chanting “we’re gonna get some trail tail,” when he passed one of their tents on the way to the latrine later that evening.

The cacophony of hormone-on-hormone collisions was almost overwhelming. The rainbow sherbets embraced Art and Amelia’s arrival with a collective squeal that rose many decibels over the high pitch sound they were already making that could be heard all down the lake shore. Amelia couldn’t resist being swept up in the girls’ enthusiasm. They were too like her at that age, full of alpha female courage that pushed them to take on the most difficult of Glacier’s rugged country.

They were, each and every one of them, round-faced and rosy-cheeked, but their bodies were lean and fit under their marshmallow coats. There was a zero percent chance Art was going to be able to sort out any of their names so he just took to calling them by their colors, which they adored almost as much as they instantly adored Art. They followed suit adopting their colors as their code names. Their hair ranged from blondbrown to brownblond. Except White’s was strawberry. Their eyes were bluegrey or bluegreen or true blue.

Something was peculiarly Siren-esque about those girls. Given the setting, maybe wood nymphish. Amelia was a good sport about the attention they lavished on her husband. Amory and Francis, the Princeton boys, were the ones suffering competitive envy.

Dinner time came and each sherbet produced an aluminum bottle full of bourbon, which they shared generously with the rest of the camp. The wind shifted and a layer of clouds rolled in on a cold breeze. Lavender whipped up a fire that warmed the entire common area – four large tree trunk benches forming a large square. The size of the flame never seemed to change, never dwindled, yet Lavender never missed a beat of conversation while tending it.

Dreamsicle Orange and Baby Blue were in an all-girls a cappella group together at Montana St., and fulfilled an apparent obligation to reinforce college girl stereotypes by leading the camp in a whiskey-drunk revue of top 40 pop songs. Art and Amelia entered the sacred circle of trust with their rousing rendition of Katie Perry’s “Firework,” but Amory and Francis were not to be outdone with their bawdy dancing through Beyonce’s “Single Ladies.”

Once Art’s protective wall was battered down, the repressed extrovert within took over. His burst of energy outlasted the youngsters and he was disappointed when the whiskey (combined with 10 miles of hiking) laid low his formidable college-aged companions. He aborted an attempt to rally the troops with a rendition of Miss Perry’s “California Girls” when Amelia gave him a light shush and gently rubbed his back.

The group was subdued, but not done in. It was the time of night in the backcountry when the natural serenity commands attention, the campfire is the star of the show and the time is for contemplation until the silence is broken only by whoever is ready to share a campfire tale or philosophical pondering.

“What are you going to do now that you graduated?” Lime Green asked the Princetonians.

“I took a job in Manhattan with an ad agency,” Francis said. “But I’m going to write books. I’ve already got 45,000 words done on my first novel. It’s about a guy who knows how to make everyone happy, which is great, except doing it makes him sad.”

“That sounds cool. I’d read it,” White said. She had nestled in fairly close to Francis on the large log.

“I think I’m just going to go off the grid as long as I can,” Amory said. “I got an offer from the company I interned for last summer, but I can’t stand becoming another consumer, you know? I’m into the minimalism thing right now. My uncle has a cabin in upstate Maine and he said I could live there as long as I want. Everything runs off a couple of solar panels. I’d have to chop my own wood. A wood stove is the only thing for heat and cooking. I’d hunt, fish, have a little garden. Basically be a hunter-gatherer. That’s the way to live, right? I don’t want to go down as the generation that killed the Earth. That’s our parents. Sorry, Art.”

“I’m not old enough to be your dad,” Art said.

“And he agrees with you anyway,” Amelia said. Art had the same dream when he was younger, even an uncle’s cabin in Michigan to live it out, but he realized the benefits of civilization and modern infrastructure when it came to courting the girl at Northwestern he wanted to marry.

“I’m proud of our generation. I’m kind of on the tail end of it. But the younger ones like you guys, I think you care about the right stuff. You want to be sustainable. You get that quality of life isn’t the same as the biggest paycheck. The fogies say you’re selfish, but I say that’s bullshit. You guys share better than anyone.”

“We share? I thought we kind of sucked at that,” Pink said.

“No, not at all. I mean, generally speaking, you overshare everything about your personal lives, but I’m talking about important things. You guys have commercialized couch sharing, car and bike sharing, clothes sharing, any stuff sharing. Older people put a premium on everything being new, so they buy cheap and disposable. You guys share quality. Older people feel like they

have to own everything and build little castles. You realize owning a big house with a big yard in the suburbs, driving 30 miles to work each way, is a burden.”

“I did a paper on trends in American youth culture last semester,” Francis said. “Almost 9 out of ten Millennials – that’s young people, Art ...”

“I am one, dick.”

“Right. Well, 90% of us want to live in a city and a third of us do live in cities, which is higher than Gen Xers and Baby Boomers at our age. It’s the great migration of our time so no one wants to buy a house out in the ’burbs and get left behind. And we don’t care about driving. This study showed that 16- to 34-year-olds drive 25 percent less now than a decade ago. And more than 25 percent of that age group doesn’t even have a driver’s license. More than half of driving age kids 19 or younger don’t even have licenses.”

“I don’t have one. I don’t even want one and I live in Montana,” White said.

“You guys are more generous, too,” Art said. “Instead of patenting everything, you believe in open source. Everyone pitches in to make a good thing better, even if it’s just an app to turn your phone into a fart sound machine. Crowdsourcing is amazing – companies just ask for ideas, and you give them away. And then the Kickstarter thing. Some guy wants to sell a watch he’s making out of his garage or a group of 15-year-olds want to make a movie, and you guys throw money at it. No return on investment. It’s pure philanthropy with a little touch of shopping. The dividend is just helping bring something cool to the world. Our generation is actually making things again. We almost totally lost that as a culture, but we’re knitting, crafting, designing clothes out of crazy shit like Coke cans and Solo Cups. We’re better off if we can do things ourselves again. Amory, what you’re trying to do is exactly what I’m talking about, man. Do it. Absolutely, do it.”

Art reached for Lavender’s bottle of whiskey.

“Yeah, Art, take a breath man. You got heavy on us,” she said. The young ’uns let out a communal chuckle.

“Sorry. Old guy talk. I know.” Art tossed the bottle of whiskey back to Lavender and knocked Francis off the log with a quick backhand to the chest. “Old guy’s still quick, though. Right, Francis?”

Now the young ’uns had a full on laugh.

“Aw, go easy on him, hon,” Amelia whispered. “You’re going to ruin the poor kid’s shot at getting some trail tail.”

“That’s great, Art. Thanks,” Francis said, gathering himself back up on the log. “So what’s your deal? Shouldn’t you be at work or something?”

“I quit. Amelia and I wanted to take some time off together, sort of focus on ourselves for a while.”

“Who’s Amelia?” Pink asked. Art gave Amelia an uncomfortable glance.

“That would be me, honey,” Amelia said.

“My wife,” Art added for emphasis.

“You don’t act like you’re married,” Francis said.

“What the fuck, Fran. Rude,” White said.

Amelia stood up and glared down at the young man. He couldn’t even meet her eyes, staring straight ahead. After holding the painfully uncomfortable silence long enough to make her point, Amelia marched back to their tent.

“I think it’s about time I got to bed,” Art said, following close behind.

Art heard one of the rainbow sherbets berating Francis in a hushed voice as he walked away. “Dick move, man.”

### **The First Daydream (US 395S through the Forsaken Land)**

Round about Spokane, Washington, the Rockies finally gave up the ghost. The land went flat and treeless. Not long after passing through Spokane, heading south, the grassland turned into mesa. It was like a big piece of Mexico snuck across the border and hitched a ride to the Pacific Northwest. Endless rolling hills of dry shrub, brown grass and rock. There were no homes. No rest stops. Not even farm equipment or grain silos. This was the oppressive scenery of the hot, dry plains region of southeast Washington; borderlands of the massive High Desert of central and eastern Oregon.

But on some of the hills, industrial-size central pivot irrigation systems reached out like giant helicopter rotors to water great circles of earth with their drop sprinklers. These hills were growing some yet-young verdant grain that converts the arid earth into a green sea of smooth, rolling waves that also, in stretches, appear never ending.

\*

Art and Amelia are standing on one of these lazy hills, stomach deep in an ocean of brilliant green wheat. There is nothing else. No road in sight, no homes, nothing. It is only him, Amelia and green hills as far as they can see.

“Where are we?” Art says.

“We’re in our marriage,” Amelia replies.

“Is our marriage supposed to be so isolated? Shouldn’t there be other people to visit or places to see?”

“It’s not about supposed to be or should be. It’s what is.”

“I don’t think this is good. Our marriage shouldn’t be so ... empty.”

“Is that how you see it?”

“No, but I think that’s how you saw it. You didn’t see any reason to stick around. Seeing it like this, I understand.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t look at it the way I saw it. Maybe you should tell me what you see.”

Art hesitates. “It’s kind of boring, I admit. But there are a lot of good things here. Look at how well this wheat grows. It’s so green. It’s so alive. I’ve never seen anything look this healthy. That’s got to mean something, right?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been blind to this place’s charms for a long time. What do you think it means?”

“It means we can still grow. It means we are growing, together. We can reap something wonderful. Our lives can be nourished.”

“That sounds nice,” Amelia says. “You should help me see this place the way you see it more often.”

Amelia grabs Art’s hand and together they stroll through the field, down a gentle slope and up another, effortlessly parting green stems that make the sound of sand falling as they pass.

“You know what else I notice about this place?”

“What’s that, Art?”

“The grain is still young. There’s a lot left to do before the harvest.”

“Work left to do, huh? Maybe our marriage is a more interesting place than we thought.”

Art and Amelia reach the top of another gentle slope, but after the infinite sea of sameness, the view from the crest of this hill opens out to a valley full of fruit orchards and vineyards.

### Chapter 3 - I-84W on the Way to Eugene

Art rubbed his eyes and he was back in the Cabrio. The fruit orchards and vineyards rolled on for miles down sloping terrain, steadily falling toward the Columbia River. This was the land where hundreds of thousands of Mexicans and other Hispanic immigrants, mostly undocumented, pooled each year to pick apples – grueling labor that only they seem willing to take, making them the only straw to stir the \$1.5 billion Washington apple industry drink.

As the Cabrio merged onto I-84W, plunging into a completely new landscape, an almost subterranean world, Art was holding on to the delusion that he could carry through to Eugene without laying over somewhere for the night. The Interstate traced the winding serpent known as the Columbia River Gorge, nestled between the massive southern cliff and the river on the Oregon side. The view extended only so far as the equally massive northern cliff on the Washington side.

Within this framed world, the Columbia River rules everything. It is like a cyborg, half living entity and half man-made machine, deep and broad with a series of dams starting not far inland from Portland and extending hundreds of miles east to Idaho. It is a mighty, unnatural phenomenon. A Frankenriver. Salmon climb walls just to return upstream to their ancestral spawning grounds. Towering wind turbines line the tops of the gorge on the Washington and Oregon sides as far as the eye can see. No living person has seen the river that nature first created, as the tribes of the Pacific Northwest fished it for salmon, for generations.

The Cabrio pointed west just as the setting sun plunged low enough for atmospheric dust to turn it into a red star bleeding crimson across the heavens. That low light silhouetted the wind turbines; spinning black machines stirring a bloody sky. But the world in the gorge was still all blue. Blue water and a soft blue shadow cast by the southern cliff.

“Is something wrong?”

“I’m just tired,” Art said. “It’s been a long day.”

“I’m sorry. I just thought you might have something on your mind you wanted to talk about.” She looked at him and held her gaze, even though Art wouldn’t turn his eyes to meet hers. It felt strange. She had passed the first 1,000 miles on the road staring out the window, reading or prompting Art with little questions like this one only to go quiet after he supplied an invariably reticent reply. It dawned on Art with brutal clarity that she had simply been waiting for him to start the conversation. This time, though, she seemed done letting Art avoid reality, and the gravity of her question pulled on issues much deeper than his mood at the moment “We should talk about things. What this trip is really about. It’s not just about going places and having fun so we can pretend everything’s great. It’s about having time to talk.”

“I talk.”

“You drive. You don’t talk when you drive. You drive, you drink Rockstar, you put on music. Singing doesn’t count as talking. If something’s on your mind, I want you to talk about it.”

“Our marriage.”

“Ok. Our marriage.”

“It’s not empty. It’s not just a wasteland.”

“I’m giving us another chance, Art. That’s why I’m here.”

“I know that. Just listen. If you’re not going to leave, you should see why it’s worth staying.”

“Ok.”

“Marriage, it’s like a living thing. It grows over time. I think maybe we’ve been trying to grow ours in a drought, and that’s why we’re doing this trip. It’s like watering our marriage.”

“I didn’t know you were so metaphorical, dear.” She put her hand on his leg and smiled at him.

“Don’t make fun of me. I’m trying.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Look, the point is we’re still growing, you and me. It’s not like we stopped, or our marriage shriveled up and died. We’re still growing. We’re still good. You love me, right?”

“Yes. Very much. I love you.”

“See. I know you’re not just saying that. I can feel it because we’re alive together.”

She lifted her hand from Art’s leg to his face and rubbed his bristled cheek with her thumb. “You should talk more often, Mr. Casey.”

“I’ve just recently realized that. I’m sorry. That’s another way I’m going to help water the crop.”

“You’re really sticking to that analogy, huh? What are we growing?”

“Wheat.”

“That’s kind of boring, isn’t it? Can we grow red grapes for wine?”

“No. Our marriage grows like wheat. It’s ordinary, but it’s what we are.”

“It’s not that boring,” Amelia conceded. “Everyone needs wheat. It’s one of the most important things on the planet.”

“I love you,” Art said. “Even when you fart in your sleep.”

“I don’t fart in my sleep! Good lord, husband, you are a romantic.”

“I’m but a humble wheat farmer.”

“Don’t bother trying to farm me tonight with lines like that, Old MacDonald.”

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The great black silhouette of Mt. Hood dominated the western horizon against the night sky when Art ran out of steam. They were still several hours short of Eugene, but there was nothing to do for it. This night, fate was a little town called The Dalles, a shadow of the Columbia River snaking like a shoe string between the river’s south bank and the south canyon wall.

The motel itself was Amelia and Art’s first hint that The Dalles, Oregon, was a strange dot on the map. It was one of those odd themed motels – a kitschy spoof of old John Wayne

Westerns with a covered wagon and fake horses in the parking lot and a giant electric light sign with flashing cowboy boots. The kind that exist in small towns because nothing about the town itself would ever convince you to stop.

“I need to stretch my legs before we hit the Spittoon Saloon,” Amelia said.

“I think it’s Wild Willy’s Western Saloon,” Art said.

“Whatever. Fresh air. Walk.”

Art had a place in mind. He drove them out to Seufert Park with its view of The Dalles Dam. It made for as scenic a walk as The Dalles had to offer, but Art had an ulterior motive.

Obsessive retention of knowledge about history and political issues was typically Amelia’s domain, but the Pacific Northwest was out of her wheelhouse. Art, on the other hand, read about the history of the Columbia River in a high school course on settling the American west. The story of The Dalles Dam was twisted enough to capture his fancy.

Walking out to the river overlook, he started with the basics: The Dalles Dam is a run-of-river hydroelectric facility, just like all its other sisters on the Columbia River. It is an engineering marvel, spanning almost 9,000 feet in the shape of a massive ‘L’ and generating enough electricity to power more than one and a half million homes all day, every day, 365 days a year.

Then he dug in to the controversy. Environmentalists consider it (and its sisters) a travesty, even with the fish ladders that have averted a full on ecological holocaust by allowing the river’s salmon to continue their annual spawning run upstream where they serve as a key cog in the wheel of ecosystems throughout Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Montana. It’s also considered one of the great cultural disasters in the history of the Pacific Northwest.

“In the ’50s when the government was in its dam building bonanza on the Columbia, the Army Core of Engineers pretty much gave the finger to years of protests,” Art said, “even though construction meant Celilo Falls, upstream to the east, would be submerged.”

“What is Celilo Falls?”

It was a place. It was the economic and cultural capital of the native tribes of the Pacific Northwest. It was the most sacred (and historically productive) fishing ground for native peoples who had fished the river for thousands of years. It was believed to be the longest continuously inhabited settlement in the modern day United States. That is until March 10, 1957, when onlookers witnessed the rising Columbia swallow the village of Celilo and its fishing platforms. They witnessed Celilo Falls disappear. The sound of rushing water over its edge went silent for the first time in millions of years.

Amelia was aghast.

“I’m not saying it was the right decision, but it was decisive,” Art said. “Sometimes I wonder why America can’t make hard decisions anymore. We just lack the leadership to do it. I don’t know if those kinds of leaders are extinct, but the people running the show are too afraid to do anything big anymore. It feels like we’ve lost the will power as a nation and we’ve let a bunch of chicken shits decide our future.”

“If the alternative is killing millions of salmon and destroying the history of native people, you might have just won my vote for the chicken shits.”

“I know, hon. It’s terrible. It really is. But correct me if I’m wrong, you like our modern way of life, right?”

“Careful, Art.”

“Sorry.” He felt the murmur, the skipped beat, the twinge, but he couldn’t hold his tongue. A little kernel of confidence heating up inside him reminded Art his wife didn’t marry a doormat. “I’m serious, though. The entire backbone of America, which most people seem to agree is pretty great, is built on really big, bold, ridiculously hard decisions. The Interstate highway system. Power lines across the country, electrification for everyone, even to the most remote town. All these damn dams. We kicked people off their land, destroyed their homes, cut down forests, and I’m sure worse than that. It was terrible, nasty, ugly stuff. But we did it. We had the will to make awful, hard decisions and no one is arguing today that all those things were

anything less than necessary for America to become great. Can you imagine the shit fit people would have about taxes today if the government decided to spend the money on something as big as electrifying the whole country? All the city folks would say screw Jethro and tell him to get his ass out of the country if he wants hot water and television.”

“I’d be annoyed at you for patronizing me if I weren’t so impressed. Who is this passionate man who stands before me on his soap box?”

“I spent a lot of time thinking about this place in high school. That’s all.”

“Did you ever think about how we had a bunch of really big factories and really big machines and millions of soldiers coming home after World War II and we had to come up with some way to use them all? Highways, power lines and dams, obsessive American car culture, Cold War. All sounds like a great way to use the crap left over from World War II to get enough money pumping through the system so the rich could start getting really rich again.”

“Why do you have to be so cynical about everything?”

“Fine, Art. Don’t listen. Just dismiss me as a cynic. It’s much easier that way. Well, you’re not going to convince me that destroying a culture and trouncing their religion is OK if it’s for the greater good.”

Art and Amelia stared out at the dam. The white rush of water down its façade was the only thing visible in the dark, like a bank of snow falling in an avalanche.

“I never really thought about it your way,” Art said. “I’m just repeating the ideas of my idealistic youth.”

“You were never that idealistic. You smoked too much pot. I understand your point, though. I could have just said that instead of being a smart ass. May I try to summarize your thesis, dear husband?”

“You may.”

“Hard work and difficult decisions are necessary on the path to build something great.”

“Fair enough.”

“Are we talking about the dam or marriage again?”

The river crashed down to its new level, dutifully turning the turbines that took its energy and sent it zipping away to people who flipped switches without a thought of the sacrifices made to provide order to their world. Art and Amelia were encased in the sound of falling water echoing around them.

## Chapter 4 - Eugene

Of all the iconic places in the West to go, Amelia circled Eugene on the map because it was one of several towns she and Art circled as young 20-somethings at Northwestern when choosing where they wanted to live in the future.

Billings was not circled on that map because it was, in fact, the furthest possible thing from their ideal. Eugene was circled. So were Boulder, Colorado, and Charlottesville, Virginia, and Austin, Texas. They were university towns, but not so small that the college was the only show in town. Amelia and Art liked the idea of being part of an intelligent community. A progressive oasis. Art liked his neighbors a little weird. Amelia liked them a little pretentious (Art's words, not hers). A vibrant live music scene, preponderance of local coffee shops and at least one craft brewery were requisite signposts.

The folks in the capital of Texas like to say "Keep Austin Weird," but they might blanch if they knew just how weird weird could get. The people of Eugene know the limitlessness of weird. Eugenites embrace it with a colorful flourish.

It's not that embracing weirdness and diversity is unique to Eugene. It's a flavor of the Pacific Northwest as distinctive to the whole region as the hoppy bitterness of their favored pale ales. Similar cultures thrive in Portland, Seattle, and a good many of the seaside towns that dot the coast as far down as Humboldt Bay in California. They generally have many things in common. Passionate love of the environment, nature, trees you hug, trees you smoke. But the color of it is a slightly different tint of weird in each town.

Art and Amelia prided themselves on being open-minded. It's not like their hometown of Billings was Normal, U.S.A. But amid the amazing dance of weirdness moving around them as they strolled down the street to Ninkasi Brewing Company's downtown tasting room, they couldn't help but judge. Dressed in their yuppie hiking duds, Eugene judged them right back.

Sitting outside having a pint together were two women: a neonblue-haired goth punk tattooed from neck to toe, dressed all in black and beetlejuice leggings, and a naturally bluegrey-

haired hippie all in flannels and hemp. Like twins, their heads turned in tandem to take in Art and Amelia walking up the street. They turned back toward each other, took mirroring sips of beer, and passed mischievous grins without saying a word. Symbiotic weirdness telepathy. It's science. They continued to eye the newcomers as they meandered onto the tasting room's patio and sidled up to the outdoor tap bar.

"What can I get you?" the bartender asked. She was wearing a long stocking cap. A lock of dyed dark red hair fell across her forehead. At a glance, she appeared to have between 12 and 16 lip and nose piercings. Too many for Art to count without it being conspicuous. She had twice that many tattoos on her arms and shoulders, which her print tank top left exposed.

"What do you have?" Art asked. "We're just visiting, but we heard Ninkasi is great."

She stared at Art a moment. Choked down a sigh. Then she recited the beer list in the exact order they were written in large pink and white chalk letters on a chalkboard over her shoulder. "Total Domination IPA, Tricerahops Double IPA, Quantum Pale Ale, Spring Reign American Pale Ale, Maiden The Shade IPA."

"Folks really like their pale ales up here. Do you have anything that's not super hoppy? My wife's not a big fan of hoppy beers."

"I'll have the Tricerahops, please," Amelia said.

"OK, never mind. My wife will have the Tricerahops. In that case, I'm not a big fan of hoppy beers."

"Oatis."

"What's that?"

"Oatmeal stout."

"Sure. Sounds great."

"Vanilla?"

"What?"

"Vanilla Oatis or regular Oatis?"

When their beers were finally in hand, Art and Amelia slid in at a communal high top table next to the synthetic blue-hair goth punk and naturally bluegrey-hair hippie.

“Did you know we just met today at a coffee shop? We’re both lesbians and we both play the ukulele. You’re not a lesbian, are you?” the hippie said to Art as he sat down next to her.

Art stammered for a reply. “I’m a guy. I can’t be a lesbian.”

“Oh honey, you can be anything you want to be. We don’t believe in assigning gender classifications here,” the woman said. Her voice was cheerful.

“I, um, no then, unfortunately, I am not a lesbian. I appreciate and respect vaginas, though. I mean my wife’s vagina. I mean all vaginas, but I’m exclusive to my wife’s.”

“Oh God, you’re an idiot,” Amelia said.

The older woman laughed. “I’m just taking the piss out of you, young fella. Nothing’s more entertaining for an old dyke than a young straight guy. See what I mean, Jean?” Jean was the blue-haired goth.

“I guess you could consider it charming. But they’re so awkward about everything. That’s what turned me off about men. The awkwardness, not penises. Dicks are ok,” Jean said.

“I’m still sitting right here, you know.”

“Are we making you uncomfortable, honey? I’m sorry. Eugene restaurants don’t have special seating sections for discriminators.”

Amelia sat back and enjoyed the show as Art drowned himself in shallow water.

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Oh my, relax, honey. You’re too easy. I’m Betty and this beautiful angel is Jean. Like I said, we just met today, but we share the same twisted sense of humor. You’re just going to have to deal with it until you can down that sissy beer of yours. What is that, Oatis?”

“Vanilla Oatis.”

“May homos forgive me for calling you a sissy. I’ve insulted us all. So what brings you to Eugene, Mr. Man? You’re not from around here.”

“We’re on a road trip for a few weeks. I guess we’re going for sort of a reset in life, trying to focus on what’s important.”

“And what have you found out?”

“About what?”

“What’s important in life.”

“I’m not sure yet.”

“We’re just getting started, really,” Amelia said. She reached out to touch Art’s hand. “But we’re growing. It’s just hard to put in words.”

“Well,” Betty said. “Eugene is a good place to learn about what’s important in life. It’ll teach you a few things. Love Mother Nature, first. Materialism is a disease, second. Just look around. People are poor here, but we’re happy. We’ve got old shit cars and we live in old shit houses, but we take care of each other. We’ve got enough thrift stores to clothe us all. The cost of living is so low we can still afford an overpriced beer at Ninkasi. And all the entertainment is free. Just go for a hike in the woods. Nothing could be better.”

“What about you?” Art asked Jean. “What do you like to do?”

“Are you talking to me, uterus defiler?”

Art was stunned into silence. Jean burst out laughing.

“Oh my God, Betty, that is fun. Holy shit, dude, lighten up. I hike, too. You don’t think I like to hike because of how I look. I get it. You’re from someplace like Omaha or Des Moines, right?”

“Billings.”

“Same difference. It doesn’t matter what anybody looks like out here. We’re here to live the lifestyle. I spend a little more time fucking and Betty spends a little more time hiking, but I think we like them the same. The only people who don’t live the lifestyle are some of the yuppie sellouts. You’re not a sellout, are you?”

“I’m unemployed.”

“Good for you,” Jean said. “Yuppie jobs are shackles. They weigh you down. It happened to my parents. Hey, are you going to drink that Tricerahops?”

Amelia shook her head no. It didn’t look like the beer had been touched. Art questioned her with a raised eyebrow. She shrugged her shoulders and his face transformed into patronizing ‘I-told-you-so’ mode.

“It’s all yours, Jean. My wife does not come with the beer.”

“What?”

Art stammered again, unable to crack the code of acceptable lesbian humor.

“You know what, Art, I’m actually pretty hungry,” Amelia said. “Why don’t we head out for dinner?”

Betty smothered Art with a musty hug when he stood up, her ancient flannel transmitting its peculiar scent of natural body odor and fresh herbs onto Art’s shirt. In the town of Eugene, a shared beer and a little understanding is all it takes to earn a new friend.

## Chapter 5 - Humbug Mountain

Eugene was a short stop. It was always intended to be; just a layover to look into a path not taken and for Art to buy an Oregon Ducks hat. But the lingering scent of Betty on his shirt as Art packed his bag in their hotel room the next morning filled him with the sense that it was a worthy stop. He had been scared peering down a road not traveled might just be a new way to self-inflict pain for a couple who hadn't exactly found true happiness on the one they chose. That wasn't the case, though, and Art pulled into Humbug Mountain State Park with a mind as tidy as the tight arrangement of camp sites arranged over mowed grass around him.

The camp had a paved road and driveway leading to each site. Campers galore. Loud kids riding bikes. Not exactly exotic camping after Glacier, but the campground wasn't the attraction of Humbug Mountain State Park. Humbug Mountain was the attraction of Humbug Mountain State Park, nestled against the rocky shore in southeast Oregon. A mist-shrouded giant stitched to the cold, grey Pacific. It is enveloped by a thick canopy of rainforest until the mountainside erodes into a set of sheer crags that plunge the final length into the rough ocean. Old detached appendages fallen from Humbug sit as black rock protruding from the water's surface.

The mountain rises 1,800-feet directly from the ocean. Seen from the driftwood-strewn beach adjacent to the campground, Humbug's rainforest canopy is a patchwork of verdant greens – Crayola green and dark green and yellowgreen. The greens' only competitor on the mountain is the array of greys. First, the Oregon Coast Highway, a grey belt around a fat man's waist. Then, almost inevitably except on the clearest days, the opaque cap of misty cloud that cloaks the top of Humbug in mystery.

Art and Amelia could barely see half of Humbug's height from the beach, but even seeing a little slice of rainforest spotlighted in weak daylight was well worth the value of knowing its true colors from without. From within, Art and Amelia stepped into a space where the laws of the senses no longer seemed to apply, colors shifting and contorting as a function of moment and distance.

They entered the forest to a short-lived burst of overwhelming greens, sliced by great vertical columns of brown – trunks of Douglas fir, tanoak, Port Orford cedar and big-leaf maple. The ground was dappled with the lavender, orange and yellow of wildflowers, the electric purple of massive snails, and the yellowgreen of banana slugs stretched long and wide as dollar bills. The colors lasted only for the first switchbacks along a trail that zig-zagged for two miles to the summit. Light that was not captured by the tight woven canopy above was absorbed within a quarter mile by mist. The diffuse soup became the forest world's atmosphere, trapped thick and still under the treetops.

Colors ceased to be, taking on the character and shades of the fog. Ferns were suddenly grey. The moss that covered rocks and stumps was grey. The flowers and tree trunks were grey. The snails and slugs were grey. The air was grey.

Only by moving very close would any of the colors return. Walking next to her, the red of Amelia's rain jacket was brilliant against the fog. Leaning over to investigate a flower or snail or slug, their colors burst forth from the bleak mire – orange and purple and yellow. But it was impossible to tell whether the color was being translated through the rods and cones in their eyes or through the mental bias that told them what they should be seeing. It was a riddle – colors invading a colorless world or a colorful world losing its colors.

Shapes behaved similarly, not following the rules of the outside world. The snails and slugs were five- and 10-times too big. The flowers were tiny, miniature versions of tiger lilies and iris. Much too small. Art and Amelia felt like Alice. They were in a Wonderland, not sure if they were growing or shrinking or how to get back to the right size.

Amelia walked ahead of Art and became a ghost in the mist. The definition of her movements disappeared, her steps were invisible. She was just a form, as still as the tree trunks, and yet she remained ahead of him as he wound up another switchback. Higher up, she was absorbed into the backdrop. She disappeared.

Art's heart began to flutter against reason in a tiny panic. Then she reappeared, her dark outline breaking free of the ether. This continued for some minutes – Amelia disappearing, being absorbed by this colorless world, and then reappearing. At times, she appeared half there or one quarter there while the rest of her lingered in some other dimension.

She disappeared again in her entirety and Art scrunched his eyes to pick a piece of her shape out of the mist. She had only been 30 feet ahead of him. Within a few seconds, the anxiety returned. His heart began to pitter, arrhythmic under the stress of the climb and creeping fear.

“Amelia,” he yelled. “Amelia!”

“I'm right here.”

She was behind him, no more than five feet. She didn't make a sound on the soft, wet carpet of decaying plant matter.

“Where'd you go?”

“I've been in the same place all along.”

## Chapter 6 - The Pacific Coast Highway

“You know what I hate?” Art asked, breaking a long silence spent staring out the windshield at the Pacific Ocean.

“What do you hate, Art?”

“Women’s evening dresses. The way women wear them once or twice and chuck them.”

“I didn’t know you felt that way.” Amelia loved shopping for dresses. Art knew it.

“It’s almost as stupid as the amount of money people contribute to political campaigns. What was it? More than two a half billion bucks spent just by the two presidential candidates. God knows how many billions when you add up all the races for Congress and state legislatures. Meanwhile, people are starving and homeless in the streets. Kids can’t afford to go to college.”

“I thought you were talking about dresses.”

“It’s so wasteful. I don’t get it. Somehow, the world has convinced you people of the horror should anyone ever see you wear the same dress more than once. Only way to avoid shame and infamy is to toss your new dress into the trash. Go spend half your paycheck on a new dress for the next thing. What a racket. Men buy three good suits that fit any occasion and we’re set for a decade.”

“You know, I buy most of my dresses at second-hand shops. It’s not wasteful and it’s a lot cheaper.”

“I don’t think you really understand what cheap means, Amelia. It’s not cheaper when you could keep wearing the perfectly good dresses you already have.”

“I think I need some time off the road, Art.”

“What?”

“I think it might be better if I catch a flight out of Oakland before you go to Randall and Mona’s. I’ll go ahead to Vegas and wait for you there. I could just use a little time.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It would only be for three days.” Amelia looked out the passenger window, down the cliff at the ocean as it broke on a cluster of jagged rocks, sea spray spewing violently into the air like white lava from an erupting volcano.

“How long isn’t the point. The point of this trip is us staying together. Now you want to leave me and go off on your own?”

“This trip is about us coming together. That doesn’t mean we’re going to be physically stuck together for the rest of our lives. Time apart is just as important as time together. It helps us realize what was missing.”

“I don’t like it. I don’t want you to go. I want us to do this together.”

“I could use some time to myself. I’ll soak up a little sun by the pool, and when you get there my batteries will be fully recharged. Promise.”

“But Randall and Mona are your friends, too. You haven’t seen them in years. Is it the kid thing?”

“No. Kind of. I love that girl, but it is hard. But that’s not it.”

“Well, here we are. Plenty of time to talk about it. I don’t have any place to be.”

“Don’t, Art.”

“Tell me.”

“You really want to know?”

Art’s response was ‘that look’ – a spasm of facial contortions intended to communicate the obviousness of the answer instead of the answer itself.

The Pacific Coast Highway was zipping past outside. An infinite blue ocean, broad strips of golden sky above and sometimes golden sands below, white spray crashing up from the rock islands that sit on top of the water like crude tombstones, long beach breaks spotted with the occasional surfer off the passenger side, a sheer cliff face (exposed guts of the Coastal Range, partially dissected to make room for the highway) to the driver’s side. America’s most famous strip of asphalt; right there in the mix with Route 66, anyway.

“I feel invisible when I’m with you,” Amelia said.

A fluttering murmur, a spasm of skips, a chest-locking twinge. “What? You’re the only person I talk to. All day in the car, hiking, at camp.”

“Until the first person comes along. And then it’s like I totally disappear. Everyone else is so much more interesting to you that you abandon me as soon as anyone appears.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The college girls in Glacier. Even the lesbians in Eugene. The second you have someone else to talk to, I disappear.”

“That’s not true.”

“Think about it, Art. Can you recall one thing you said to me when those people were around? Did you make any effort to incorporate me into the conversation?”

His heart sped up even more. He was losing control of the situation. He felt like their relationship Hail Mary was doing what Hail Marys generally do – fail. “I shouldn’t have to incorporate you into a conversation. You’re a big girl. You can speak for yourself. And, I’m sorry, why is it my fault if they don’t talk to you? Maybe you should try to come off less like an ice queen.”

Amelia looked out at the ocean, gave the Pacific a stare cold as its water.

“I’m sorry,” Art said.

“No, you’re not. And that’s the problem. It’s not your fault I can be insecure. But you’re my husband. You could help me deal with that. I know I’m a big girl. I’m big enough to admit I would like my husband to help keep me included. That kid in Glacier, Francis, he didn’t even realize I was your wife.”

Whether she was right or wrong to want to skip ahead to Vegas was irrelevant now. Art was in checkmate.

“It’s just a few days. It’ll be for the best.”

Amelia resumed watching the Pacific Ocean stream by, a picture of serenity. Art's eyes set on a hairpin turn up ahead and the yellow diamond with the black image depicting rocks falling from a cliff onto the roof of a car.

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After winding through the world's last living old-growth redwood forests, including the Avenue of the Giants, and splitting the hazy cloud of pot smoke through Arcata and Eureka, the Pacific Coast Highway bids adieu to U.S. Route 101 in favor of California State Highway 1 in a small town called Leggett. California 1 may claim the fame from there south, but U.S. 101 goes on to lead a rather interesting life serving as a major access point to Sonoma and Napa as it brushes past some of the world's premier wine and vineyard country. U.S. 101 might just as well be called the Chardonnay Highway through these dry and mild parts. Amelia said it reminded her of Tuscany – not a bad comparison with both regions' undulating hills and alternating checkerboard boxes of land (green field of grape vines here, fallow field of golden grass there, lines of shrubs tracing the borders of each square).

“Do you remember when I said I wanted us to take a Wine Country vacation out here?” Amelia said somewhere north of Santa Rosa in Sonoma County.

“It was about three years ago,” Art said. “After we saved up a bunch of money then found out we couldn't have ... I remember.”

“And you said sure, of course, let's do it.”

“That's right.” Art glanced at his wife. She was watching the grape vines roll by, long rows appearing to separate from the green mass of foliage only to quickly contract back into it as the Cabrio passed.

“But what'd I say the next day?”

“You said you didn't really want to go to Wine Country. It was a vacation pretentious assholes took. I think you said it was something for rich people with no originality or people who wanted to look rich. You said it wasn't for us.”

“You really do remember. What’d you say when I told you that?”

“Well, I think I said cool, if that’s what you want.”

“You were so sweet to me. You knew how bad I was hurting. I was confused. I still am, confused that is, and you are still sweet. Tell me what you thought when I told you I didn’t want to go.”

“I thought thank God. You can get a decent bottle of Chardonnay from Sonoma for 10 bucks at Whole Foods. Well, before all that, the first thing I thought was: there’s the girl I married.”

She turned back to the undulating hills, green vineyard, golden grass, green vineyard, golden grass. One after another they passed, but the faint smile on her lips didn’t change. She didn’t speak again until the other side of Santa Rosa. A ways after Petaluma, they would split off U.S. 101 to cut across the San Pablo Straight on I-580 on their way south to Oakland International Airport.

“This little bit of time apart is going to be OK,” she said. “I’m going to miss you. I want you to have so much fun without me. Make me jealous. Maybe get in a little bit of trouble. Not too much, OK? I know you and Randall. But try to remember the girl you married some more, too.”

## Chapter 7 - Oakland

“Whatchoo talkin’ ’bout Amelia’s not with you?” Randall stood six-foot-eight, broad shoulders and an increasingly broad belly to match. Despite naturally speaking with what he called ‘white folk diction,’ he was throwing his best Gary Coleman *Different Strokes* at Art to communicate the severity of this transgression.

“I’m sorry, man. I should have called ahead and told you, but it literally just came up. We thought she was going to be able to come until yesterday.”

“See, I told you Randall. She said she was flying to Vegas on Facebook.” Randall took up nearly the entire doorframe, but Mona found a space to peak her head under his shoulder. Her hair was dyed almost silver at the top where her bangs swooped across her forehead, then gave way to platinum blond as it fell its full length down over her shoulders and chest. Her skin was about as pale as her hair, the true ivory to Randall’s ebony. Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder will serenade them in heaven one day.

“She just had to fly ahead to Las Vegas for a job interview.” Art looked at his feet. He was a terrible liar.

“Oh shit! Y’all moving to Vegas?” Randall said. Art shrugged his shoulders, not wanting to compound the lie.

“It’s just an interview, Randall. God, are you going to invite your friend inside or not? And you could help him with those bags, you know.” Mona was a professional ball buster, but for all the right reasons. Like gravity on the largest celestial bodies, Big Randall attracted more trouble than your average human being. Mona had mastered the art of tough love to manage what all friends came to call “Randall Problems.” Tough love and their eight-year-old daughter Jewel kept him straight(er) these days.

Jewel sat half obscured in the darkness, apathetically plucking at a ball of yarn she was using to knit a scarf.

“Jewel, are you going to say hello to Uncle Art?”

Art handed his bags off to Randall and opened his arms wide. “Hey kiddo! I haven’t seen you in so long. You were a little tike the last time we hung out. How old are you now? Six?”

“Eight.” She oozed nonchalance. If she were older, you could have said she oozed ‘fuck off.’ She was wearing a white tank top with a large black mustache on it. She wore thick-framed glasses and a stocking cap, from which her hair fell to her shoulders in two frizzy hot pink pigtails.

“I didn’t know Jewel wore glasses.”

“She doesn’t,” Mona said. “Those are just frames. She likes them. We’ve all got a pair.” Randall picked his up off a table in the foyer and put them on.

“Wait,” Art said. He looked closely at the hair, the glasses, the clothes. “Randall, are you wearing skinny jeans? Holy shit, are you guys hipsters now? When did this happen?”

“Language,” Mona said.

“I’m sorry. But hipsters? Randall, there’s no such thing as a black hipster. Not unless you play in the NBA.”

“Hey, don’t be filling my daughter’s head with that racism. Don’t worry, Jewel, baby, Obama’s president now. We can be anything we want.”

“I know, Dad.” She didn’t look up from her knitting. It was chilly in the house and she was wearing a scarf. She appeared to be knitting another one just like it.

“But you’re a cop. Cops can’t be hipsters. Not in Oakland. Aren’t you dealing with like some serious crime? What if some criminal sees you around town in skinny jeans, some suspenders and a bowtie?”

“Oh, ain’t nobody stopping me from wearing my bowtie.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, man,” Randall said. “Oakland is hipster now. You didn’t know? The Mission got too expensive so they all came across the bridge from San Fran. Best thing that’s ever happened to Oakland. It’s boom times in Oak-town these days, baby. We got microbreweries and bicycle

shops on like every corner. It's crazy. I saw a group of thugs yesterday loitering outside a liquor shop, brown bagging it and all that, looking real old Oak-town. This hipster chick rolls up on her cute little aqua beach cruiser with a bag of groceries in the front basket and asks these kids if they can keep an eye on her stuff. I just knew I was going to have a 4-8-8 on my hands. But I'll be damned if they didn't keep an eye on it. Then she came out and gave them all deuce deuces of PBR and rode off."

"Get out of here."

"Completely serious. Thugs don't know what to do with hipsters. They're like kryptonite. Black folk woke up one day and didn't even realize they'd been kicked out of West Oakland. They get you so confused you don't even know you been gentrified."

Oakland went from no (white) man's land to hipster haven in about three years flat at the start of the decade. Home values finally started rising, live music and arts were on the upswing, the economy was stabilizing on the back of a budding craft beer and cannabis club scene. The mayor of every bootstrapped town in America goes to bed praying a hipster hoard will find them next. But Oakland's decades of history as a cultural capital for black Americans were going out with the street sweeping. Old roots have been pulled up like weeds, leaving Oakland a childless city as its long-time black families make a swift exit, replaced by a demographic that isn't likely to stay once they have kids of their own.

Whether Oakland's hipster hot spot status marked a true renaissance or just a mustache finger tattoo held to the lip of a dying cancer patient was exactly the type of debate Art would hope to get into with Randall. They could argue over anything, like the best of old chums, and that's exactly what Art was looking for to keep his mind from getting too lost in the maze that was his relationship with Amelia.

Art settled onto the couch next to Jewel and played catch up with Randall and Mona. He hadn't seen them since their wedding, almost five years, but Randall and Art grew up together. It was a friendship built on the rock-solid foundation of countless youthful mistakes. Time or

space could not crack their friendship because all it would take was reminiscing over one old story to spackle it back good as new. Two-thirds of those stories stayed in the box so long as Mona was within earshot. Pretty much the entirety of the high school and college years.

After an hour or so, Art even got Jewel to show some modicum of enthusiasm. The little hipsterette was, in fact, still a little girl and Art tricked her into a giggling fit with his story of the Katie Perry sing-a-thon in Glacier with the sherbets. Not long after, she fetched a fairy coloring book and asked Art to color with her.

A couple hours and several snifters of Hennessy later, the doorbell rang. It was the babysitter. The plan was to leave Jewel behind and show Art around the new Oakland. Randall had on an argyle sweater, a polka dot bowtie and black porkpie hat to match the thick black frame of his glasses. Skinny jeans, too; an absurd look on his already absurdly long stork legs. Mona was wearing a mint green flannel tunic over black tights, plastic shades with neon green temples to finish the look. Art, on the other hand, was wearing dark custom-fitted jeans (tight by the Old Standard, but veritable MC Hammer parachute pants by hipster measure) and a white linen button down shirt. Fairly sharp, for a night out in yuppie bars.

“Ey, YoYo. What’s up, young blood?” Randall dapped up the babysitter at the front door and let him in. He was a young kid, maybe 16, with a handsome dark complexion framed up by a massively oversized Oakland Raiders snapback cap that required every millimeter of circumference to fit over a huge bundle of dreadlocks. He wore an oversized white T-shirt and baggy jeans that were belted tight just over his knees. The pants crotch sank almost to his ankles where a pair of silver flathead Nikes collected the crumpled denim of his pants legs like a discarded accordion.

“How those gunshots healing up?”

“Yo, yo, it’s good, Officer Purnell. Check it out.” YoYo corralled his oversize T-shirt and pulled it up, revealing every inch of his boxer briefs and his stomach. Two angry pink circles on his abdomen were surrounded by light bruising. “I took the bandages off yesterday.”

“That’s good. And you listened to what I told you? You haven’t gone back around that complex since?” Randall waited for YoYo to nod affirmation. “Good. Them dudes in that hood don’t need a reason. They’ll shoot you just because they don’t know you. Leave those guys to us. Art, this is YoYo from around the corner.”

“Yo, yo, what’s up?” YoYo said. He gave Art the courtesy of assuming he’d know how to dap up properly since he was Randall’s friend, but Art was still stupefied by the gunshot wounds. He botched it to the point they finished with an awkward business hand shake.

“We’ll be back late, YoYo,” Mona said. “Make sure she gets to bed by 10 p.m. Don’t let her trick you again. There’s pizza in the freezer. Go ’head and order anything you want on Pay-per-view. No scary movies, though. She’ll sneak down and watch from the stairwell.”

They walked out into the driveway. It was much more suburban than Art had imagined Oakland. Then he noticed something for the first time. Randall and Mona didn’t have a car.

“Y’all know I threw back too much cognac to drive, right? And you guys had just as many as me. How are we getting to Uptown? Should we call a cab?”

“Aw hell no, we’re not paying for no cab. We’re riding bikes.”

“What?”

“Seriously,” Randall said. “The police department gives me a free bike, I’m going to get all the use out of it I can. Mona’s going to ride Jewel’s bike, but you have to ride Mona’s.”

Mona led them around the side of the house. There, locked up, was a white police-issue mountain bike, a child’s pink beach cruiser and a turquoise fixed-gear courier bike with pink streamers and a wicker basket on the front.

“Really, Mona? Streamers?”

“Fuck off, Art. I like streamers.”

“Can’t you get a DUI riding bikes drunk?”

“You could. But not if the officer giving you a field sobriety test says you’re sober.”

Randall raised a finger in front of Art’s eyes and moved it back and forth, up and down. “Looks like you’re sober. Besides, that’s why we wear helmets. Safety first.”

Mona opened a locker bolted to the side of the house and threw Art what appeared to be a pink and black checkered houndstooth fedora. Feeling its weight on the catch, Art realized he was holding the universe’s most hipstered hipstery bike helmet in hipster history.

“You’re going to pay for this, Randall.” Art buckled up the chinstrap.

“Damn, you actually look alright now. You should keep that on. Maybe you won’t get laughed out of hipsterville.”

“He definitely needs to keep it on.” Mona was snapping a picture with her iPhone.

“Do not put that on Facebook.”

“Too late,” she said.

“Do not tag me.”

“Too late.”

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The Murmur. Art could not believe what he was seeing was Oakland. The Murmur is a monthly street fair that started as an art gallery showcase and exploded into a phenomenon.

At 19<sup>th</sup> Street, the crowds got too thick to keep riding so Art, Mona and Randall hopped off and started walking up Telegraph Avenue. Telegraph was bracketed by food trucks.

Ridiculous, ridiculous food trucks – the chowder mobile, a crème brûlée truck, curry and cake and sausage and Vietnamese soup trucks. The street teemed with performers and musicians, some with tremendous talent and others banking on pure spectacle to earn a few coins for their cup. Jug bands, bucket drummers, dancing troupes, even freestyle rappers. They walked past medicinal marijuana clubs and art galleries among the ubiquitous local coffee shops, restaurants, brewpubs and bars. Vendors hocked art and trinkets from the sidewalk. Art saw people on

unicycles, bikes with a giant front wheel and tiny back wheel, and – the strangest of all – a sort of double-decker framed fixie that placed the pedaling rider seven feet off the ground.

“This is insane,” Art said.

“You telling me,” Randall said. “I usually have to work this thing. I had to pull some serious shit to get off tonight on just one month’s notice. So I hope you know we’re getting tore up.”

Randall was magnanimous enough to let Art try one local Oakland brew with the caveat it was to be used as a chaser for shots. The big man was a force of nature at bars. Every bartender and manager knew him. It wasn’t even because he was a cop. It had always been that way, since he and Art were kids growing up in the burbs. The only thing bigger than Randall was his personality. The guy coasted through life like some higher power actually was looking after him. He might have been the only cop in Oakland who truly believed he had the greatest job on the planet. Three years on the force and he was not one bit jaded.

His smile got bigger and voice boomed louder after two rounds of bourbon shots. Art stuck out like a sore thumb in his yuppie duds, but Randall kept the right drinks in his hand, which was all it took to blend right in to the scene.

An old fashioned followed by a Manhattan. A PBR to slow things down, which got chugged on a challenge from a trio of hipsters. Art, Mona and Randall punked a fedora with suspenders, a flat cap with a bowtie, and a neon flower print snapback hat with turquoise hair in a boat race chug off. Then a dram of Scotch. Two Moscow Mules each. Another PBR.

Randall was getting half of their drinks free, but buying twice as many for randoms at the bar. Mona was usually the man’s financial saving grace, but she had taken the bus to Wastedville and was egging him on by that point. Everything about Randall was big, including his generosity. He didn’t seem to mind years of living paycheck to paycheck so long as he was making sure everyone else had a good time. At 30 and with a real job, he was like a hipster patron saint. They loved him.

“Do you know Randall?” the flower print cap with the turquoise hair asked Art. She looked ridiculous, but beautiful. Maybe 21 years old, probably less. Art didn’t want to know. A thick braid of turquoise hair draped down into the cleavage of her breasts. Her body was young and pert and on display in a pair of impossibly short cut-off jean shorts and a loose white tank with a faded picture of some 1970s-looking kid sitting on a toilet.

“Yeah, I’ve known him for more than 20 years. He’s one of my best friends.”

“What?”

“I said I know him.”

“Oh, cool. He’s so rad. That guy is totally rad.” She gave Randall the kind of look that would have been game over for the big man in days gone by. Then she surprised Art by turning to him and surveying him with the same lascivious look. Completely indiscreet.

“You guys should come to our house party tonight. I’m about to go now.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Art said. She clinked her bourbon on the rocks to his PBR. Art turned tail to fight through the crowd at the bar back to Randall.

“My boy, Art. How you like Oakland now?” He had two shots of Jack in his hands and was dancing with them. Mona was teetering next to him, eyes half shut. She was entering full crash mode.

“Maybe we should start heading home. Mona looks done and I think turquoise girl from the boat race just tried to pick me up. It’s getting a little crazy.”

“Oh, it hasn’t started getting crazy yet. One of my boys on duty tonight is coming to take Mona home. Then we’re going to a house party.”

“Wait, a house party? What house party?”

“I don’t know. A house party. That’s how hipsters do it. The guy in the fedora over there invited us.”

“The guy in the fedora? The one talking to turquoise girl right now? That’s the same girl, Randall. Didn’t you hear what I just said? She’s trouble.”

“Aww shit! Art gonna get some bad hipster booty tonight! Amelia going to be mad at you, my brother.” He added one last wiggle to his dance and slammed both shots, back-to-back Jack.

Mona rose from the dead and smacked him. “He’s still married, Randall. Don’t be an asshole. Do you know what I will do to you if you ever mess up with one of these young skanks?”

“Girl, I know. I was just playing.”

Art cut in on the escalating 10-16. “What do you mean I’m still married? Does that surprise you.” He felt his face flush. Actually, it was already well into flushed territory on accounts of the shots. He felt his face burn.

“Easy, Art. Easy.” Randall knew Art and the signs of a drunk getting angry. “We just heard things had been a little rough lately. You know news travels these days. I’m just saying, it wasn’t a total shock she didn’t make the trip with you.”

“She just went ahead to Las Vegas. Quit giving me shit about it.”

Mona reached up and touched Art’s face with the sweet compassion of a completely uninhibited drunk. She closed her eyes and leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. “We love you guys. You and Amelia. Hope you’re together forever.” Her eyes never opened as she spoke.

Randall grabbed her around the waist to support her. “Hey, we’re just trying to have a good time. You’re only here a couple nights. Let’s do this house party thing up and get ridiculous.”

“Fine,” Art said. He reached beside him and snatched a shot from an oversized Denver Nuggets flat brimmed snapback in a horizontal rainbow-striped tank top. He threw it back and then almost threw it up. Awful. It was absinthe.

“Hey, what the fuck, man?” the Nuggets snapback and rainbow tank said. Randall flashed his police badge and the kid walked away.

Randall loaded Mona into the police cruiser outside and thanked his buddy. The Murmur crowd had thinned out, but the bars were still packed at midnight. The entire scene started spinning on Art. The absinthe was one toke over the line.

“I don’t think I can ride a bike, man.”

“Damn, Art. You look rough. You turn into a lightweight on me? I know what you need. The taco truck is right around the corner. It’ll get you right.” They wheeled the bikes around the corner. Art tried to order one Mama Salsa Supreme, but Randall ordered two more for him. He was on a first name basis with Marvin (aka Mama Salsa), the truck owner. The tacos did good work for Art. Grease and calories put the earth under his feet again and the spice cut right through the thick absinthey haze, but he was still good and proper drunk.

“I can’t even walk straight, man. I can’t ride that bike.”

“Fine. We’ll get there another way. You are causing issues tonight.”

“Can we take a cab?”

“Oh, hell no. I’m not wasting my drink money on no cab.” Randall was already up flagging down a young hipster couple riding by on a tandem beach cruiser. He flashed his badge at them. Sorry kids, bad timing. They stopped in front of the taco truck and eyed the Oakland PD badge.

“You two look a little shaky on that tandem. You just get it?” Randall said.

“No. We always ride together,” the girl said. She had short dyed black hair, flat bangs across her forehead, and bright red lipstick. A pixie look about her. No way she was 21 yet. The guy – oxblood skinny jeans and T-shirt with a storm trooper wearing hipster shades – nudged her. He sensed the trap.

“Have you had anything to drink tonight?”

“Just a couple, officer. Honestly,” the guy said. “We’re almost home. It’s just a couple blocks.”

“Then you won’t mind walking the rest of the way, will you? Unless you want me to ask how old you two are.”

They popped off the bike and the guy handed the front handlebars over. “Dude, you can’t just steal our bike.”

“Shut up before I take you downtown. I’m locking it up right here. The combination’s 10-23-13. You can pick it up in the morning. Don’t even try to get it tonight.”

The guy started to argue, but the girl pulled on his sleeve and they virtually ran away.

Art gave Randall a look. “Shut up before I take you downtown?”

“It worked, didn’t it?” Randall finished the last bite of his fifth Mama Salsa supreme and locked his police bike and Mona’s streamer-bedazzled fixie to a fence behind the taco truck. He mounted the front seat of the tandem and looked at Art. “You ready to do this?”

“No.”

“Too bad!”

Art was barely on when Randall started pedaling. The rear set of pedals started turning and Art couldn’t manage to get his feet on them. The faster Randall pedaled, the more pathetic Art’s attempts to get his feet situated. He foot paddled the pavement like he was driving the Flintstone-mobile until they were moving so fast he just let the soles of his shoes drag along the heavily patched asphalt. Then they started down the hill.

“Oh God we’re gonna die,” Art yelled. The hot air blasted his face and swirled around his pink houndstooth fedora helmet. The rush sounded like the ocean in his ears.

“You suck at riding a bike.”

“You suck at driving a bike.”

“It’s not easy carrying your dead weight around.”

“Speaking of weight, your fat ass needs to scale back on the Mama Salsa supremes.”

“Careful who you calling fat. You’re about a cheesesteak away from saying bye bye to your toes. I ride a bicycle for a living. I’m a machine.” Tearing down the hill, the bike suddenly teetered. Art lurched forward and felt the absinthe almost come back up.

“Goddamn white boy, hold still.”

“If we die, I’m going to throw up all over you.”

“You ruin my argyle, I’ll cut you.”

Randall leaned right and banked the tandem fixie onto an unlit road full of dark houses. Art felt the absinthe rise up in his throat again (plus something that tingled, maybe one of the Moscow Mules).

A minute of easy pedaling later, Randall hit the brakes. Art, slumped over his handlebars, sat up and surveyed the scene. It was yuppie white guy hell. Rows of old houses sat in varying states of disrepair, half with metal grates over the windows and the other half simply abandoned, boarded up. A group of black teens sat on the stoop of one house eying them.

“I know it’s around here somewhere,” Randall said. They were in a residential neighborhood somewhere east of Telegraph, but hadn’t made it so far as the MacArthur Freeway.

“Is it safe here?”

“Huh? Ah shit, Art. This is a good neighborhood. Don’t be a bitch.”

“What’s that sound?” Art heard a deep thundering boom, pulsing over and over. Arrhythmic at first, then coming together with a definite beat.

“That’s the party!” Randall put his full weight into the pedals. Art didn’t even try getting his feet set this time. Randall rounded another corner. Some of the houses were in the same dilapidated state as those on the last street, but many were different. Very different. These houses were lit up like Christmas or open air cantinas in the Caribbean. Bikes were locked up in every front yard and the distinct sound of white folks partying echoed from most porches. Discordant combinations of Bon Iver and Wilco and Arcade Fire clashed in the street, riding

sound waves sent from vintage 80s boom boxes. But one sound ruled them all – the thundering bass from two houses up on the left. The song was ‘Around the World’ from Daft Punk’s 1997 breakout album ‘Homework.’ A swarm of hipsters overflowed the porch and front yard.

“It’s on,” Randall exclaimed. He jumped off the tandem fixie. Art was unprepared to balance on his own and went down with the bike like the captain on a sinking ship. His white linen button down picked up a fat grass stain on the elbow. He was too drunk to care.

“What should we do with the bike?”

“Leave it. It’ll be fine.” Randall was already penetrating the fringe of partygoers.

The bass thumped between Art’s ears when he stepped inside the house. Everything felt like a dream. The partygoers danced and talked and drank and made out in dark corners, but Art couldn’t hear a sound they made. It was like watching *The Wizard of Oz* on mute, synced up with Pink Floyd’s ‘Dark Side of the Moon’ on full blast. Art stayed close on Randall’s heels as the big man worked his way to the kitchen where a foldout table was loaded with quarts of cheap vodka and whiskey in plastic bottles.

A voice cut through the noisy silence.

“Officer Purnell, what’s up man? You want to split this joint?”

“You know I can’t be smoking that mess, Johnny. I’m a man of the law. We’re all routing for you to get over that anxiety down at the station. My boy Art here has a bad case of the ’itis. I bet he wouldn’t mind a toke.”

“Hey bro,” Johnny said to Art. “Officer Purnell’s the dude. Here, take a vicarious hit for him.”

Art stared, his mouth hung stupidly half open. Johnny put the lit joint to his lips and Art inhaled, as much a reflex as if a doctor had just tapped his knee with a hammer. As The Strokes’ ‘New York City Cops’ from 2001’s ‘Is This It’ boomed to a start, he pulled too hard and coughed up a ball of smoke that hung around his head. Fitting, because his entire head felt like it was in a cloud the second he took the hit.

Johnny patted him on the back. A pair of girls yelled at Art to “take that shit outside. Not everybody thinks pot is cool.”

“Fuck off,” Johnny told them. Then to Art: “Pot hipsters are the worst. Nothing’s worse than smug posers fronting they’re all about individual expression, then trying to regulate what’s OK for other people. That’s why I moved out of S.F. To get away from these people.”

“You part of the migration to Oakland?” Art managed to make most of the words coherent. His mouth was slow and sticky.

“No, man, I knew the locusts were coming to eat this place. I own a farm out past Brentwood.”

“You’re a farmer? You don’t look like a farmer.”

“What’s a farmer look like?”

Art’s head swam in chronic fog. He couldn’t formulate a response. Johnny might as well have been the Sphinx offering riddles to passersby.

“I’m just messing with you, man. I know what I look like. I was a developer at Instagram when we got bought by Facebook. I got rich on that deal and was probably the biggest poser in Hipsteropolis. I thought I was hot shit, changing the world, and then my Grams asked me to explain my job one day. I had to explain I basically write computer programs so teenagers can take better selfies. She gave me a ‘that’s nice, dear,’ but her eyes said it all. Sucks when your Grams is on the Harvard Board of Overseers.”

“So you quit and decided to farm to make a difference?”

“So I quit and decided to farm to make a difference. Farm-to-table’s a bit higher on the good-of-humanity scale than selfie enhancement.”

Randall returned with a half-full solo cup of warm whiskey and shoved it in Art’s hands. “Take a sip of this. It’ll get your mind right again. The weed out here hits you hard.”

“I’ll let you boys get back to it,” Johnny said. He tipped his flat cap and merged into the pulsing sea of commotion.

Oddly enough, the cheap whiskey did balance out Art's buzz, but only if he kept moving. Standing still, the world spun so fast he couldn't stay up on two feet. It'd be a case of Down Goes Art or one-way ticket to Vomitville. He took the third option to the dance floor.

"There's my boy!" Randall followed him out. He and Art jumped up and down, vibrating and oscillating like maniacs to 'New York City Cops.' Hipsters love individual self-expression, which Randall had naturally in spades and Art had a touch of thanks to his pot-enhanced moves. The dancing old dudes were like catnip to the 20-somethings. Girls with hair as rainbow sherbet bright as the Glacier girls' mummy jackets flocked to the dance floor. On their heels were guys in suspenders and hoodies and tight fit V neck T-shirts. They were trying to play it as cool as their clothes, but had a hard time maintaining an air of nonchalance trailing the ladies like their asses were full of magnets.

Art started to sweat and the spinning slowed down. He opened his eyes and the turquoise hair girl with the flower print cap was right in front of him. She was trying to dance with him. He tried to turn away, but was blocked by Randall grinding on some girl behind him. He was hemmed in by the wall to one side and a mass of dancers to the other. There was no escape so he turned to face her.

She mouthed something at him. All Art caught was, "Glad you made it."

'New York City Cops' ended and 'The Postal Service's 'Such Great Heights' kicked in. They stared at each other for an awkward moment.

"Oh hell no." It was Randall's voice bellowing from behind. The man had never stood for a lull in a party playlist, not one errant song choice was admissible. He grabbed Art's shirt tail and yanked him helplessly away from turquoise girl.

"This party's going to die with music like this. We need to set this shit off right. Help me fix the playlist." Randall bulled his way through the crowd – Art in tow in one arm, the other serving as a battering ram – to an iPod docked into a sound system in the corner. At least give hipsters credit for one thing: they are avid enthusiasts of almost any genre of music. Their tireless

quest to express their individuality leads to some tremendous diversity in the catacombs of their music collections. Be it in the form of vinyl played on vintage gramophone or digital.

“Oh thank God they’ve got Biggie,” Randall said. By the time ‘Such Great Heights’ wound to its drawn out, adrenaline-destroying conclusion, thrumming like a wet fart, Randall had plucked out 20 choice tracks to set the party on fire. A bunch of ’90s hip-hop liquid gold bangers that were like the greatest hits of his and Art’s life. The playlist would hit the hipsters like the ultimate retro party mix. Within two tracks, they’d be asking why nobody said it was a throwback party because they could have worn the neon windbreaker, slap bracelets and the Reebok Pumps they scored at Goodwill.

Notorious B.I.G.’s ‘Juicy’ dropped from ‘Ready to Die’ and for a second the hipsters stood frozen, confused. Their faces were all turned to the page titled ‘What Just Happened?’ Randall towered over them, strutting to the middle of the dance floor. It was easier to navigate through them in their stupefied state. He threw one hand up in the air, pointed it like a pistol, and started waving it up and down. It was like the starting gun to The Kentucky Derby. Pow! The entire house started the race, bearing down on the dance floor like it was the final straightaway. Big Randall’s head looked like a disco ball floating above the fracas. Art could have sworn the teeth flashing with his massive smile were reflecting rays of light around the room.

Art downed the rest of his warm whiskey. The first couple of ounces went down easy. The third through fifth ounces were rough. This is where Art crossed the threshold to Tore Up from the Floor Up. He coughed up a bit on his shoulder, leaving a tea-colored wet spot on his white button down to complement the elbow grass stain. His mind ascended outside of his body. The music took over, animating his living corpse.

Warren G ‘Regulator.’ Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg ‘Nuthin’ But a G Thang.’ Biggie’s ‘Gimme the Loot.’ Old Outkast from ‘Aquemini.’ Randall snuck in some hard core cheese, too. Juvenile’s ‘Back that Azz up’ and Mystikal’s ‘Shake Ya Ass.’ Art was putting in hard work

through all of them. He looked like his body had sprung a leak. His white button down was soaked.

Whipping arms and elbows, Art popped and locked, tossed in ostentatious spin moves and hints of Michael Jackson. He imparted a healthy sense of fear and respect in neighboring dancers, which helped him etch out his own unmolested circle on the packed floor. Art didn't even notice Randall was gone until he came back.

"Come with me," Randall said.

Art followed Randall like a snake seeking warmth. "Where are we going?"

"We're hanging out with Natalie upstairs."

"Who's Natalie?"

"Damn dude, you've talked to her like five times tonight. It's her house. She's the one who invited us." Art gave him a blank stare. "The turquoise hair girl. Real cute. Titties."

Art's stoned eyes bulged, bringing them to about three-quarters standard open width.

"That's bad news, Randall."

"Whatchoo talkin' 'bout, fool. That girl is cooler than a polar bear's toenails."

"I'm telling you, she's cruising for it. I saw her check you out."

"You are making what my police sensitivity training tells me are inappropriate inferences based on your chauvinist attitude."

"Fine. But I told you. She's trouble."

They reached a room at the end of a closed off hallway. The din of the dance floor was just a picture-rattling thrum in the background. Randall knocked on the door.

"Come in." Natalie was lounging back on a bed with a turquoise comforter that matched her hair. She had lost the flower print cap, undone her braid and let her hair drop across her shoulders. An old Moroccan rug covered the floor. A musty old couch was jammed in the corner covered with loose shirts and underwear. The walls were covered with old vinyl album covers and two long shelves stacked with antique cameras. Dangling strings crisscrossed the ceiling,

photos developed from film clothes-pinned to them. In the center, a large marionette of records dipped and spun in lazy circles.

“My new best friends,” she said. “Let’s hang out.” Randall bulled in and plopped down on the couch, panties and all. Art took a seat next to him, propped on the edge in a clear spot of floral upholstery.

“I like you boys. You’re fun.”

“Where’s the rest of your girls, Nat? I thought we were about to have some champagne.”

“I’ve got the champagne right here.” She leaned forward over the edge of her bed. Her loose tank top sank down away from her chest. Art looked away, feigning some sense of drunk chivalry. She rooted around for the bottle and Randall’s eyes bulged with a comic insistence demanding Art look, too. He grabbed Art’s shoulders in an exaggerated embrace and mouthed “thank you, God” before Natalie finally dug it out.

She smiled at the boys, still dumbstruck with stupid looks on their face, and gave a quick look to each breast. Art told Randall she was trouble. Natalie stood up and stepped over to a small desk. She put the champagne bottle down and turned to face them.

“How long ago did we meet, Randall?”

“Probably a year ago. Right after you graduated SFAI. Why?”

“You and Mona are so cool.”

“I know. You need help popping that bubbly?”

“Your friend is cute. Maybe even cuter than you,” she said. Art was weed disabled enough to be rendered mute by the mental taxation of banter. He looked back and forth as if to say, “Who? Me?”

“You know how to pick ’em, girl. Art’s as married as I am,” Randall said.

“I like married men.” She reached down with crossed arms and grabbed the hem of her tank top. She lifted it over her head and dropped it on the Moroccan rug. Her impossibly short

daisy dukes were already unbuttoned. She nudged them with her thumbs and they fell off her hips to the floor.

Art felt a wave of panic and, if he was being honest, something else. But he didn't do anything.

Randall. Randall, on the other hand...

He jumped off the couch and slapped Art across the face. Hard.

"You, sir, are under arrest for unlawful titty ogling. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will ...let's go, mother fucker." He grabbed Art by the arm and jerked him off the couch. He made an absurd racket pushing Art out the bedroom door as Natalie stood there naked, dumbfounded. One step out the door, Randall turned and threw a pair of Natalie's underwear from the couch at her.

"Put on some panties, girl. Let's keep it sanitary."

They ran down the hall, past the dance floor and out onto the porch laughing like maniacal teenagers. "Go! Go! Go!" Randall yelled as they burst into the front yard, past hipsters in smoking jackets sucking on pipes.

"What are you idiots doing?" Johnny was sitting in a Tesla Model S parked on the curb.

"Johnny," Randall said. "Save us. There are child predators after us. I hate these reverse pedophiles. It's an epidemic."

Johnny unlocked the doors and they hopped in. "Where to?"

"Home," Art said.

"Oh, hell no. I can't go home. Mona will smell sin all over me. I need Chicken and Waffles to cleanse this evil."

"I'm going home, man. I've got a long drive. I can drop you guys off, but I'm not going for Chicken and Waffles in Oakland."

"That's it," Randall said. "The farm. That's perfect. Can we come? I'll text Mona and tell her to pick us up tomorrow. She'll understand. Back to the earth. Good dirt. Hard work. That's

what we need to cleanse the impurities. I will hoe a whole row of butter beans if it will make me unsee the things these eyes have seen.”

“Yeah, that’s fine, man. As long as you guys go to sleep when we get there. I’ll show you around tomorrow. Is that cool?”

Randall looked at Art. He was already asleep, his head wedged against the window.

“I don’t think that’s a problem.”

\*

Art rolled over and wrapped his arm around Amelia. She spooned into his body. In his dream, Art was in a tent with his wife. That’s why a wave of confusion burst through Real Art’s sleepy peace when Randall’s big laugh worked its way into his dream state.

Where am I, he thought, and tried to piece together the possibilities. If they were at Randall and Mona’s, why were he and Amelia sleeping in a tent? Then a vision of a turquoise-haired girl entered his mind. Art’s heart skipped as his eyes shot open. His arm wasn’t wrapped around Amelia. It wasn’t wrapped around a naked 21-year-old, either. It was wrapped around a 98-pound yellow lab whose name tag said ‘Chuck.’

He sat up too fast. Searing pain mixed with a lingering fog in his head left Art seeing double for a moment. It was hot. He looked down and saw he was under – not in – a sleeping bag. He appeared to be on a porch. The bright white sun shone in a crystal blue sky, illuminating row upon row of crops. He was at a farm. That much, he could deduce. What farm was another matter.

“Hey, Mr. Sleepy’s finally up.” Randall walked out onto the porch and handed Art a tall glass of thick green ooze.

“What the hell is this?” Chuck the yellow lab sat up and smelled it then ambled away.

“Fresh juice. Hangover cure. I just blended it. Romaine, spinach, celery, apples, wheat grass, broccoli, ginger and fresh squeezed lemon. Drink it.”

Art braced for the worst, flicking his tongue at it like a lizard. Surprise, surprise, it was pretty damn good. He quaffed half the glass on the second go.

“Why am I on a porch?”

“You refused to come in. You said you only sleep under the stars now then laid down on the porch and passed out.”

“Why are we at a farm?”

“Damn, you were tore up last night. Johnny saved us from that turquoise succubus at the party. I told him I couldn’t face Mona until I cleansed the impurities so he brought us to his farm. We’re in San Joaquin Valley.”

“So the naked girl was real?”

“Real for real. You tried to tell me.”

Chuck started barking inside the house, came running out to the porch, jumped over Art and lumbered down the long gravel driveway. Art and Randall followed the yellow lab until they saw the red Cabrio, top down, kicking up dust in the distance.

“Oh boy, I got some ’splaining to do. Hey, Johnny told me to send you out when you woke up and he’d show you around the farm. You mind giving me a few minutes with Mona? He’s out by the asparagus.”

“Where’s that?”

“Shit if I know what asparagus looks like. I hate that mess. I think everything’s off that way.” Randall pointed east, under the high sun. Art got up slowly, discovering how much his back was going to punish him for sleeping on a hard wood porch. He walked out into the driveway as Mona pulled to a stop.

“Thanks for coming for us, Mona. We love you.” She gave him a dismissive wave, her silver-blond hair disheveled and her eyes hidden by enormous dark sunglasses. Jewel emulated her mother, offering Art a limp wave similarly lacking any gusto. “Ok, I’m just going to get a tour of the farm. See you guys in a bit.”

Chuck trotted along beside Art out into the tidy rows of crops. The farm was massive, but Chuck put his nose to the ground and led the way. At least, Art hoped he was leading the way. They walked past endless rows of fresh market tomatoes, mostly green on the vine with the early fruit just turning. Then stretches of green and red lettuce. Cucumbers. Bell peppers. And finally asparagus, where Johnny was in what looked like an off-road golf cart inspecting every few chubby purple-green shoots.

“Good morning, sunshine,” Johnny said. “Welcome to Instagram Farms.”

“It’s nice. I can’t believe how much stuff you grow.”

“Over spring, summer and fall planting seasons, we grow more than two dozen crops. Most of them are specialty, niche crops for a few restaurant clients in Oakland and S.F. Right now, it’s mostly organic market tomatoes and asparagus. They’re the money makers at the city farmer markets. You should see the Asian plots, though. We’ve gotten in supplying a few restaurants in Chinatown and a couple of sushi places thanks to some developer friends from my Instagram days. We’re growing some wild shit back there.”

“Does everybody grow this much?”

“No, no, I’m the crazy new age guy around these parts. The San Joaquin is a cash crop valley. Tomatoes, asparagus, cotton, almonds, grapes for raisins and wine. I’m a small timer out here. But I tell a lot of the farmers what I’m making working direct with restaurants, growing on demand, and they’re impressed. It’s high margin stuff by agriculture standards.”

“What are you checking the asparagus for?”

“Oh, farmer problems. There’s always something wrong. The drought’s bad this year and the irrigation district is cutting back our water allocations. It’s showing some signs of drought stress, but it ought to be alright. My peppers are doing great and the tomatoes are getting by, but the cucumbers can’t handle it this dry. They’re a bust.”

“I don’t think I could handle all that hard work and then see it all just shrivel up and die and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“It’s not an easy living, that’s the truth. People think farmers are bumpkins, but damn, I’ve got to worry about commodity price swings, insurance, counterparty credit risk. Brogramming’s easy street compared to this. Won’t make you rich, either. Honestly, you can make a living running a small farm like this, but I wouldn’t be anywhere near comfortable if I didn’t cash out on Instagram.”

“Sounds stressful.”

Johnny narrowed his eyes and looked at Art. He didn’t look like a farmer, but he laughed like one. A quiet, reserved laugh; akin to the cowboy’s 1,000-yard stare.

“You bet,” Johnny said. “But it’s worth it. There are no shortcuts to anything worth doing. It’s about enjoying your life, you know?”

“I’ve heard that,” Art said.

## Chapter 8 - Through the Desert on (U.S. 95S and) a Horse with No Name

Two mornings after waking up on the farm, Art was driving in the rich forest of the Sierra Nevada, back among the Pacific Northwest's great tree giants, the wildflower covered fields of Tuolumne Meadows and towering grey knuckles of stone rising above it all. And then he wasn't. Much the same way as, for his few short days in Oakland, he was free of all the worrying and endless hand-wringing about his future with Amelia. And then he wasn't.

At the harrowing 3,000-foot free fall known as the Tioga Pass, Art guided the Cabrio down, burning up the brake pads just to hold it under 90. In the span of a few miles, California State Route 120 plunged out of the Sierra Nevada range into the mountains' rain shadow and the start of America's great thousand-mile expanse of western desert. A desert, Art became very conscious, that connected him and Amelia over a space of more than 300 miles.

He thought about her while he was in Oakland, sure, but in the idle context of watching Randall and Mona and Jewel and wondering how such a quirky set made it all fit together, just so, in a way that seemed both ludicrous and built to last forever. Watching the three of them, snuggled up on the couch napping through bad Sunday afternoon cable TV movies after finally getting home the day after the party, made Art marvel at how very different they were. It was like he saw two versions of the day after the party as parallel film projections. The first, real life, passing right there in front of him in Oakland, California, and the second, in his mind, featuring just him and Amelia.

In the first, he saw Randall, whom Art once believed – was sure, in fact – was the most selfish man he had ever met, shaking off his fatigue to make apple-green lettuce-celery-lemon-orange-avocado juice blends for Jewel and Mona, the latter still suffering from a crushing hangover. He saw all three of them waking up together in the evening in time for their nightly fix of professional wrestling, which was every bit as terrible as Art remembered it being when Randall used to make him watch it 15 years ago. Then he heard Randall and Mona start to joke

about the events of the preceding night, all the dirty details in code, and laugh even harder as Jewel tried to guess what they were talking about.

In the second, he saw himself sitting quietly behind his laptop in his chair and Amelia spread out with a pile of magazines on the chaise lounge, one hundred unasked and unanswered questions starving the room of oxygen. The television, an unattended *Law & Order* rerun, substituted as conversation for the room. But rather than dwelling on the sad disparity of the two projections – one warm and inviting, the other cold and detached – Art merged them. Or, perhaps, they merged themselves. He and Amelia were suddenly on the lounge together, Amelia irreverently joking about how the dead college girl in the episode of *Law & Order* probably messed with the wrong woman’s man and got what was coming. And as the ice broke, the easy discourse between them grew. The shift was small, but Art saw how it made all the difference.

By the time Art’s heart rate dropped back to normal at the bottom of the Tioga Pass, his hours of peaceful reflection were in the rearview mirror with the massive wall of snow-capped mountains marking the eastern ridge of the Sierras. As quickly as the terrain shifted, his insides shifted from serene to anxious. He was in the desert with Amelia now. It was as if he already needed to start performing for her, and he wasn’t sure if he could pull it off in all that damn heat.

Still descending, but at a more reasonable rate, Art rounded a curve turning east and faced a massive panorama of pink and tan desert surrounding a huge lake. The lake looked like an oversized washer, almost perfectly round with a large round island near the center. It was Mono Lake, which Mark Twain once called in his semi-autobiographical novel *Roughing It*: a “lifeless, treeless, hideous desert... the loneliest place on earth.” The depiction was wrong, Art knew. The lake’s not lifeless. Twain just got there in the wrong season. Each spring, the lake becomes covered in a pea soup-like crust of algae, which in turn feeds several trillion brine shrimp, which in turn feed millions of migrating water birds, shorebirds, song birds and other travelling Avialae.

And trees are there, too, although the northern reach of the Inyo National Forest doesn't seem like much of a forest. Especially, having just dropped out of Yosemite. As the road dipped and swooned, up and down and over an endless field of abrupt ripples in the earth, Art couldn't help wonder how the Inyo pines survived in the gravelly, pinkbrown dust that served as soil. That stretch of the Inyo is clearly desert, but no one called to tell the trees yet. They stood alone with virtually no undergrowth and at an oddly thin density, each tree like a suburban home with its own private front and back lawn.

The spindly tree phenomenon didn't last long, heading east on Route 120. All life seemed to cease by the time it gave way to U.S. 6, the Grand Army of the Republic Highway. And after Art passed the aptly named White Mountains to the south, he felt truly swallowed by the desert, open and vast and lonely. The object of comparison for 10 million metaphors about the void, there in the dry, salty flesh. Forget towns, houses, shacks, cell phone towers, fences, farms – they all disappeared. Here is a place, Art thought, where you wouldn't be able to figure out how to survive even if everything you needed was sitting right out there in the vastness somewhere.

Art reached a point where he really wished he had paid the extra 75 cents per gallon to fuel up in Yosemite National Park. As his fuel panic was reaching a fever pitch, the Cabrio limped into Tonopah, Nevada (population circa 2,500), which owed its tricky desert survival to a few critical wishbones that cracked its way over the decades, foremost among them being the halfway point between Las Vegas and Reno.

Art was in and out of Tonopah in a flash – that is to say, in 12 gallons and a trip to the cooler to pluck out a Rockstar. Barreling south down U.S. 95 from Tonopah, his view out the driver's side window almost the entire way down to Vegas was comprised of the Nellis Test Range and its component parts. Scientific breakthroughs, weapons of mass annihilation, the altered course of human history – all right there to his left. A lifeless expanse of brown and grey desert covered in tiny rocks, sagebrush and creosote. Dust devils spun interminably here and

there across the horizon. The intense reflection of the sun off the highway caused oncoming traffic to disappear behind a mirrored mirage. It had a chaotic feeling, like a carnival fun house.

Driving beside the test range, Art couldn't help but remember his sermon to Amelia back by The Dalles Dam. They were related, in a way. Strong decisions like establishing the Nellis Range paved the way for a confident federal government to flood native holy sites for clean energy later in the '50s. Art thought about that – not so much the rationale for each decision, but how the whole chain of decisions obliterated so much of the west. He could see Amelia's point so much more clearly after being without her for a few days and wondered if his first words to her ought to be: you were right about the dam.

Part of Art still saw it all as a relatively small price to pay to set America on track to become the world's dominant power. Telling a few desert hillbillies to hit the dusty trail and clear out; incinerating a few million rabbits, tortoises, ravens, mice, snakes and such that would be in the wrong place at the wrong time during tests. But he started to see how it all added up – the test range, the dams, the roads. On and on, the calculations kept accumulating in his head until even he wondered if the combined weight of all that suffering and disruption could have been worth it. He didn't renege on his belief America was a better place for everything that had been built – interstates across the land, electricity for everyone, all the hallmarks of modern life – he just respected what had been sacrificed instead of dismissing it as for the greater good, which is probably all Amelia wanted in the first place. She just wanted respect for the alternate view: maybe we shouldn't revere The Greatest Generation with such absolute devotion and bemoan everything since. All their decisive actions had costs worth remembering and all the inaction of modern times that Art lamented so often was benefitting people somewhere.

Art chewed on the number of times he had preached the greatness of The Greatest Generation to Amelia. Her quiet patience when he would cut her off to wax poetic about the chutzpah and cojones of those heroes. He wondered how long it had been since he had truly listened to her.



## **The Second Daydream (US 95S along the Nevada Test Site)**

Art is over the desert. High, high over the desert. Winding ribbons of brown and grey, a kernel of green along the spine of a ragged ridge here and there, white circles like dimes marking dry lakes. Vegas is visible in a haze of sand and pollution far to the south.

He's falling, that is clear. The wind rushes past his ears, the sound so loud that at first he mistakes it for silence. He's falling fast.

He tries to lift his arms, kick his legs, but nothing moves. He tries to crane his neck to see what's above him, but he's stuck looking down. Straight down where he's headed for impact.

How does he know where he's going to land? He notices the crosshairs in his vision. Two thin white lines intersecting right over the middle of a white dime below. He realizes he's not human, he's an atomic bomb. He's just been dropped from a B-50 bomber on his way to eviscerate a dry lake bed on behalf of the defense of the American people. At least it'll be an honorable way to go, he thinks.

But the white dime grows larger within his crosshairs and he realizes it's not just a dry lake. It's shimmering, mature stalks of wheat waving back and forth in the dry desert air. When he sees someone walking through the field, hands gliding over beards heavy with kernels, he knows that it's Amelia.

"Stop," he yells. "Stop the test. It's a mistake. There are people. My wife."

But he's at terminal velocity and there's no stopping him. The damage was done the second the bombardier opened the hatch and let the payload fly. He closes his eyes. He can't bear to watch.

When the aliens catch him, he doesn't realize he's not weightless anymore. He's too afraid to open his eyes for fear of seeing Amelia just before incinerating her. He senses that he should have made impact, but refuses to look at anything other than the white crosshair behind his eyelids. Until he hears the alien voices. More precisely, until he hears their voices in his mind.

The aliens chant some strange incantation and he feels his body morph from a barrel-chested, 10,000-pound, 13-kiloton Little Boy-model atomic bomb into a 6-foot, 220-pound, balding Caucasian-model man. He looks down and can see his arms and hands again. He is naked and clammy.

They are big-eyed, reptile-nosed humanoids. The popular modern image of Visitors made famous by alleged sightings in Roswell, Area 51 and throughout the west. The spaceship is all smooth silver walls. White lights show up in a strange pattern of glyphs on the wall. One of the aliens points a finger at the glyphs, then flicks its hand up. Three glyphs slide up the wall and onto the ceiling overhead, then expand to become three large white lights that bathe the room evenly in a soft daylight.

“Why am I here?” Art says.

“You did not want to destroy your target. If you did not want to destroy it, why were you preparing to detonate on it?” There are five aliens in the room, but Art hears the voices of many more simultaneously ask the question in his mind. They sound like the New York City Children’s Chorus. It seems every alien on the ship is tuned into his mind.

“I couldn’t help it.” Art felt defensive. “I just opened my eyes and there I was, falling. I couldn’t stop myself.”

“You were going to destroy everything you love,” the chorus chimes.

“What was I supposed to do? Someone else made me into a bomb. Someone else dropped me. I didn’t want to kill my wife. I love our farm.”

“Someone else makes all of us,” the collective sings. “All beings are dropped into different situations without choice. You call it chance. We call it *grftkloch*. The intricacies of this idea are too multiple for a human mind to fully parse, but it is closer in meaning to your word fortune. In your fortune, you have some power to alter situation. It is malleable. You are not a bomb. You are energy, constructed in your most recent manifestation with the properties of a bomb, but energy is transferable.”

One of the aliens extends its long index finger toward Art and touches his forehead. An intense tingling sensation, then his body feels like it is being pulled inward through his belly button.

“You must choose to transfer your energy into an advisable pursuit. Fortune allows it.”

\*

Art found himself staring at a kitschy green alien head with yellow eyes painted in bright lime green and lemon yellow. It was the Area 51 Alien Center and gas station just north and west of Vegas, a U.S. 95 tourist trap to rival all great American tourist traps. He had rounded the western flank of the vast Nellis Range around its southwest corner. The great proving ground of American innovation, paranoia and hegemony lay to the north. Dust devils kicked up the lingering particles of radiation out in the range.

## Chapter 9 - Vegas

Art was nervous when he pulled up to the condo tower on Harmon, just west of the Strip. The tower was quiet compared to the big Strip casinos. Amelia had been here three nights without him. The Strip was just across I-15 – sin and temptation itself in plain sight.

He felt his murmuring, skipping heart when he stepped out of the elevator on the 18<sup>th</sup> floor and found their unit empty. He found a note from Amelia on the kitchen table after slinging his backpack down on a dark brown leather couch. I'm at the pool, it said, come find me.

The apartment was clean, tidy, sparse. Modern. The island range divided the kitchen from the living room, which looked out over I-15 and the Strip through glass walls facing out to the north and east. The master bedroom and bathroom were the only other rooms. There were barely any signs to prove the apartment was being lived in. No dishes in the sink. Amelia's backpack was tucked into the bedroom closet and her clothes folded away in a sleek dresser. The maid was either really good or something compelled Amelia to make an extra effort.

It was early afternoon. The sun beat down from high overhead, hung in a pale blue sky that looked like half its color had melted away in the heat. It was pushing 105. Art had checked his iPhone on the drive down for the 5-day Vegas forecast. An epic heat wave was forecast to push into the valley over the next two days; 105 was just an appetizer to the entrée on its way.

The pool was empty, other than Amelia – her brownbronze figure in a white bikini lying on a white pool towel laid over a white plastic lounge chair. Her hair, dark and wet, was slicked back. Copper highlights glinted in the sun. It suited the desert, transformed her into part of its armature.

She sat up, set down a copy of *People* and lifted off a pair of yellow-tinted knock off RayBans (cheap imitations of the 3138 Shooters worn by Johnny Depp in *Fear and Loathing in Las*

*Vegas*, sold at every junk shop on the Strip). Art hoped they weren't a symbol for Amelia's Vegas experience the last few days.

"Hey!" Her smile was effusive.

"Hey," Art said. "It's nice here. The apartment is great. Really clean."

"It is nice. I'm about sick of it, though. If I have to sit in that apartment or lie around this pool one more hour, I'm going to go insane. I'm so bored!"

"Is that all you've been doing?"

"Pretty much. I had a bottle of wine last night and watched fireworks from the apartment. I've taken a walk over to the Strip every day just to get some exercise. Like my glasses?"

"They're something."

She smiled and rolled her eyes. "I didn't want to go into the casinos without you. It's no fun if you don't have a gambling buddy. I've just been sitting around reading, thinking a lot."

Her expression changed.

"Thinking's good, right?"

"Yeah, thinking's good. I missed you."

Art sat down at the end of her chair. "So, I prepared a speech on the way down here. It was a long drive. I wish you could have seen the desert. It's ... strange. Do you mind if I tell you something?"

"Speechify away, my love." Amelia draped her arms around Art's waist. They were still cool and a bit wet from her last dip in the pool. She rested her mouth softly on his shoulder, part kiss and part resting place. Art looked at the pool, the ripples of refracted sunlight focusing his mind on the task at hand.

"I'm hopeless without you. If you weren't in my life, I would never be anything. I'd probably be dead. I didn't always know I was doing it, but I think I've punished you for being so serious about things. I think I felt like you were holding me down. But that's not true. You keep

me grounded. That's different. Without you, I just float. I float into the most ridiculous situations. Sometimes it feels good, but I have no control. And I'm not getting anywhere when I'm like that. I fell in love with you because you were the only person who ever made me feel like I was part of something that actually had a purpose. Somewhere along the line, I started fighting the idea that I needed a purpose. Like there was some secret commune of artists and philosophers with an infinite capacity to humor my bullshit waiting to take me in and you were the only thing keeping me from it. I lost the truth, that I loved having a purpose. Because you are my purpose."

Amelia lifted her lips slightly off his shoulder and looked at Art in profile. She considered his words for a moment.

"We're pieces of a puzzle."

"What?"

"You and me. We're pieces of a puzzle. The whole world is out there around us, but we fit perfectly in the middle. Perfect inverses."

Art turned away from the pool and looked at Amelia. Her usually dark eyes were caramel flecked with gold in the desert sun.

"You're a dreamer, Art. You always have been. I don't know what happened in the last few days to make you realize it. It's a tough thing to be, but it makes you wonderful. It's exactly what I need. Just like I'm what you need. I can't help that I plan everything. Or that I'm wired to overachieve."

She stopped for a moment, trying not to bury herself in old frustrations about her self-perceived shortcomings. Art wasn't sure if she was going to go on, but one deep breath seemed to restore her resolve.

"When I got here, I thought I could try to stop being that way, be more like you just floating with the breeze. I thought that's what it'd take to make you happy. Then I got mad. I got really angry at you for making me feel so stupid about sending you to Whole Foods with printed

lists or because I spend so much time training for races. After I beat the shit out of a couple of pillows and got myself good and exhausted, I finally admitted it's not you making me feel stupid. It's me being embarrassed about being me, and not being like you. But I don't need to be like you. I have you. You lift me out of my routines and help me feel more."

"This road trip." Art stalled. He didn't know how to say what he knew he needed to admit. "This road trip, I wasn't trying to get the wind blowing through your hair so you'd be happy. I was trying to get you stuck with me for another month so I could trick you into thinking I could be what you wanted. Or what I thought you wanted. I don't know. I just hoped you'd forget about the whole leaving me thing."

She smiled – a melancholy smile but a loving one – and scratched the hair at the nape of his neck. "I've never doubted that you love me, but I doubted if you thought you were better off with me. That's why I was going to walk out. I didn't want you to change. I just wanted you to be yourself."

"There's something we need to do."

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

"Besides cleaning up at a blackjack table, getting ripped and having ridiculous make-up sex against those glass walls so the entire Strip can see your cute little butt."

Amelia made a face of mock horror. "I'm scared of those walls. You'll knock me right through."

"We have to remember who we are. We work when we're being true to ourselves. I've been trying to take care of you and I've been overdoing it for two years. It's made me shitty and it's not even what you needed."

"I think I've been going along with it just because you've been trying so hard. And all our friends said I should let you. They said with all I went through, being depressed and all that, I should let you shoulder things."

She stood up and walked to the edge of the pool. She dove in, her tiny fit body barely disturbing the water. She surfaced and swam back to the edge, smoothing her hair back behind her head.

“No one understands us but us, Art. We have to make our decisions.”

\*

Art was donning his good duds again. The custom-fitted jeans and white button down were back, freshly laundered at Randall and Mona’s. And from the depths of the Cabrio trunk, a carefully packed grey summer blazer picked up from Stuarts London and a pair of oxblood loafers.

Amelia had him beat with a tight white cocktail dress, a light gold belt chain pinching it in around her waist to bring out her curve. Nude heels. A single thin gold wheat chain hung around her neck complemented by gold hoop earrings. Her hair was pulled back, styled into a glamor ponytail. She was letting her beautiful copper skin do the talking. Everything else was just an accent.

“Damn we look good,” Art said. “You fine, baby. I look good just standing next to you.”

“Shut up!” She gave him a playful smack across the chest.

It was time to get Vegas. No more camping. No more tents. No more hiking with bad shin splints. They cabbled it to Firefly on Paradise, an early paragon of the emergent Vegas dining scene hidden from the Strip with all its gaudy people and gaudy prices. They gorged on more tapas than seemed possible. The waiter warned them they’d ordered too much, but each fresh pitcher of sangria seemed to open up a new corner in their stomachs. Oh, the sangria. The scientist who determined alcohol is a depressant never sat under the warm late Vegas sun cooling off under the influence of ice chilled red sangria. Art and Amelia became lightheaded, goofy, satiated to giddy perfection.

They cabbled it to the Strip. The sun was down and the crowds streamed into the streets like water from a burst dam, vampires allergic to the light. Actually, they were allergic to the heat.

It was a balmy 98, but infinitely more tolerable out of the beating sun. The crazies, freaks, drunks and addicts blended in seamlessly with the tourists out for a taste of the wild life in Sin City. The women were a colorful confetti of skin tight spandex club dresses, some worn exquisitely, others not, but all gaudy in one way or another.

Art and Amelia cruised the Strip to burn off the weight of dinner. They stopped at the Bellagio to watch the fountain show and see its Chihuly glass and flower displays, walked through Caesar's under the cloud-and-sky ceiling of its shopping center, and made it as far north as the gondola-filled canals of Venice. Every inch of the Strip was put on, spun sugar, like the perfect gingerbread house with a witch lurking within ready to eat you. But there's a divine comfort going along with the show, accepting Vegas's whole ludicrous act, that gets you out of your own skin.

They settled on Bally's as their casino du nuit on their way back south. The tables were less expensive than the Bellagio or Caesar's, but it was less grimy and run down than O'Shea's and not as depressingly empty as the Trop. They circled the floor like sharks, waiting for the right moment to strike. They dropped small bills in slot machines at random, winning a few dollars here, losing a few dollars there before cashing out.

Then their wanderings and a touch of fate brought them before a \$5 blackjack table. It was removed from the long bank of table games in the main pit, off to the side and alone next to a craps table and a roulette table. Unlike every other blackjack table, the dealer wasn't an aging attractive woman or slick-haired wannabe Mafioso type. He was an old, clean shaven black man with a name tag that said Ivory. Remarkably, there were three open seats. Anyone who has ever been to the Strip knows exactly how rare it is to stumble upon even one open seat at a \$5 blackjack table at any hour, much less as the peak shift was coming on.

Recognizing Lady Luck when she stared them in the face, Art and Amelia sat down quickly.

“I was hoping y’all would sit down and play,” Ivory said. “We’ve got a nice little game here. Where you folks from?”

“Well, sort of nowhere and everywhere right now,” Art said.

“Oh, we got a lot of folks from there in this town,” Ivory said. He was everything a Strip blackjack dealer was not supposed to be. He wore a big smile full of pearly teeth, he chatted, he invited you to be his friend. He was slower than sin, feeling the edge of each card on his fingertips before drawing it from the automatic card shuffler. He’d slide a card out, give it a little shake up and down as if he was testing the weight – or the luck – of each one, then drop it with a dramatic flourish in front of the next player. He’d examine each turned card with a little “hmm” or “ooh” before moving on to the next.

Art and Amelia adored him immediately. “How long you been dealing, Ivory?” Art said. Amelia smirked and nudged him under the table.

Ivory didn’t know or just didn’t care Art was having a little fun with him. “Oh, I been here at Bally’s about 15 years now. I used to be across the street at the Flamingo. I reckon I was there for about 20 years.”

“Don’t listen to him. I play at this table every week for 20 year and I never see him until 10 year ago.” It was the Asian lady playing to Art’s left, holding down third base. She had broad features that looked Chinese, but her face was painted like a geisha – a thick coating of white powder caking up in the deep cracks lining her cheeks, cherry red lipstick, thick eye liner. Her black hair was molded into the shape of a Connie Chung circa 1980 do. The long painted fingernails on her right hand clicked and clacked on her mountain of chips. With her left, she managed to smoke a Virginia Slim despite the curling claws. She smelled like a dead pepper plant.

“Oh, I wouldn’t argue with you, Madame Chang. You remember everything. I’d bet you remember every hand I ever dealt you. But I didn’t always deal blackjack here. You must have missed me on the three card poker tables when I first come to Bally’s.”

Madame Chang appraised Ivory. Her eyes narrowed and her heavily lipsticked mouth pursed into a little frown. She tapped the table with the long fingernail of her right index finger. “Hit me, Ivory. Make it good.”

He threw her an eight. “Twenty-one,” Ivory exclaimed.

Ivory flipped over his hole card and showed 15. He threw himself a six. “And that’s twenty-one.”

“Ah, you motha fucka sometimes Ivory. You lucky Madame Chang like you so much.”

“Plucky little peacock,” Amelia whispered in Art’s ear.

Art traded in five \$100 bills for \$5 and \$1 chips and placed his customary first bet of \$10 with \$1 pushed forward to tip the dealer \$2 on a winning hand. Then he did the same thing in front of Amelia. No matter how much Art encouraged her, she never had the confidence to play at a live table. She knew most of the right decisions to make, but she clung to the irrational fear that she’d accidentally hit and throw off the whole table, then become the hated villain. Or even more embarrassing, watch everyone walk away to escape the novice. But she did very much like sitting at the table where she could route for Art and get a steady supply of free booze since it looked like she was playing.

Ivory dealt the first hand like an artist reading poetry. Art had to stay on 16 and 15, but Ivory busted with the slowly unpacked tension of a Cormac McCarthy novel. Art exhaled when the final card fell and the group at the table let out a cheer.

“It about goddamn time, Ivory.” Madame Chang looked at Art. “You come to straighten Ivory out, huh? You good luck for table. Very handsome, too. Don’t worry, honey. Madame Chang see you married.”

The cheer caught the attention of a passerby. A particularly haggard passerby. The man limped up to the table and asked if the table was hot. The deep canyons running up and down his ragged face made Madame Chang’s wrinkles look like ant trails in the dust. His face was a

lattice work of leathery grooves. His eyes were a dull grey. Hair grew out of his nose and he had the longest, floppiest earlobes Art had ever seen.

“It not so good Henry. Ivory take all our money.”

“Oh, I know all your tells, Madame Chang.” Henry sat down quickly in the last open spot, just to Amelia’s right. “If you say go away, it means you’re raking in all the money. Howdy Ivory. Deal me in. I want a taste.”

Art wasn’t sure if the man could taste. Up close, he looked even older. He might have been 100. He had some sort of small crater on the left side of his forehead, like a skin cancer or something had been removed. Liver spots covered the rest of his forehead and all along the back of his hands. He wore a World War II Veteran trucker hat.

“I’m Art. Pleased to meet you.”

“Howdy son. We’ll be good friends so long as you don’t take the dealer’s bust card.”

“That won’t be a problem, sir. Can I ask, are you a World War II veteran?”

“Yessiree. Proud veteran of the United States Navy. I fought the Japs at Iwo Jima. Admiral Nimitz shook my hand personally after the battle.”

Art was stunned. That would put the man at 90 years old, or close enough it made no matter. Madame Chang rolled her eyes.

“You tell same story to every new blood who sit down? If I hear about Yanks saving China one more time, I going to shit brick. You sure your money not better on craps table tonight?”

“Hell, he asked, honey. I’m just being friendly.” Henry slammed the edge of the table as Ivory slowly flipped the fifth card to the dealer’s hand. A five.

“Twenty-two,” Ivory said. “Dealer busts.”

“Hell yeah,” Henry cheered. “I ain’t going anywhere, Madame Chang. I’m parking my little fanny right here tonight. This table’s hot. I knew it.”

Art didn't mind the banter. Madame Chang, Ivory and old Henry were exactly the queer brand of off-kilter Vegas entertainment he and Amelia were hoping for. And he was now up \$40 in two hands. He dialed back to two \$5 bets to let the winnings settle for a minute. He ordered a Red Bull and vodka from a cocktail waitress. A little boost to gear up for a big night.

Ivory was a master of dramatics on every hand, throwing the players fakes by looking at their cards before he dealt them, making painfully twisted expressions to dash their hopes before dropping the exact card they wanted. He'd wave his free hand over his hole card and chant for it to be a bust card before flipping it. When dealer showed ace, he'd draw in a deep breath to make the table's collective pulse race while checking for blackjack, only to slide the cards back into place with a sly grin on his face.

There were more ups than downs and the whole table was in good spirits. Plenty of dealer busts to keep everyone in the black. Madame Chang hit a string of blackjacks and was making a killing on the side bet besides. It was Lucky Ladies – any unsuited 20 paid 4-to-1 and suited 20s paid 9-to-1, but every sucker playing the bet was really chasing lightning in the form of two queens of hearts at a 125-to-1 payout.

An hour passed like a few moments. Unlike in the main pit, it seemed no other dealers were around to rotate with Ivory. He was a pleasant mainstay. As winning tables are want to do, the players got friendly. Art and Amelia, Madame Chang and Henry, in particular. The couple leading off the table mostly kept to themselves, whispering some Eastern European language no one recognized.

“You ain't Italian, are you?” Henry asked them.

“Italian? No,” the man said. He looked Mediterranean, but sounded Russian. Maybe Croatian or Serbian, Art thought. The man wasn't volunteering any clues. Henry turned his attention back to his left.

“I can’t stand them Italians,” he said. “Snake bastards. Fight with Hitler one day and the next act like it’s all red wine and spaghetti. Come visit Italy, they say. Have a great time. You’ll have to take me to hell in a hand basket before fascists get a dime of my money.”

“Well, it’s been almost 70 years,” Art said. “Things have changed a lot. They’re a more tolerant country now.”

“Snakes hiding in the grass, that’s all. Seventy years ain’t nothing. Mind that lesson, young man.”

Ivory listened to the conversation attentively as he dealt. One. Card. At. A. Time. Art and Henry gestured with their hands to hit or stay as the game carried on, one deal after another, prattling on uninterrupted.

“Ask me, ’Murica’s getting too much like Europe. Germans. Italians. The damn French. Can’t tell a difference between us and them anymore. That’s the problem with us today. We won the war, had it all going for us, then we started acting like the losers. You kids took everything we give you and messed it all up. No offense. Don’t mean you personally.”

Art didn’t mean to, but he closed his eyes and sighed. It was all he could do not to get started with a nonagenarian.

“Hey now, you don’t have to look defeated. Like you’re ashamed, or something. That’s another problem with you kids. You give up too easy. You can’t never commit to nothing because you expect everything to be handed to you with a pat on your candy asses telling you how great you are. Sometimes, I think we gave you too much. Made life too easy for you.”

Art hesitated, then gave in. “Well, I don’t know about what you gave us.” Amelia gave him a curious sideways glance. “Look Henry, I’m grateful for what you and all the veterans have done for this country, but I don’t know if your generation accomplished anything other than listening to your parents. Same as most every generation.”

“How’s that? I don’t reckon I follow, son.”

“Well, I’m just saying I think the name Greatest Generation was given one generation too late. Your parents said fight here, fight there, do this, do that, build this, build that. So what’d you guys really accomplish? Everything great was done because your parents had the idea for it.”

Ivory stopped for a long moment and looked at Art, then remembered to keep dealing. Madame Chang emitted a surreptitious little giggle and lit another cigarette. She was never without one for more than a minute or two.

“Now I know I must have heard you wrong, son. Forgive my old ears. But you’re going to have to speak up.” Henry’s voice rose steadily, making it clear he heard Art just fine.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to offend, Henry. Let’s just play the game.” Art waved over his cards to stay. Amelia rubbed the small of his back and smiled at him in approval of his restraint.

“No. No. No.” Henry was insistent. “Say what you mean, son. I want to know what the hell your generation done to give you the right to speak like that.”

“Well, that’s just it. My generation’s barely adults now and we haven’t really done anything yet. Well, we’ve fought in a couple wars, but I’ll admit it’s different than the two yours fought in. We’re still just trying to figure out who we are. We’re just doing what our parents have told us to do. And the message they gave us is don’t be fooled into believing in a myth like they were. So I think we’re trying to live life the best way we can figure out how. That makes us just like you. Your parents told you to build a bunch of shit, so you did it. The difference is my generation hasn’t fucked up their kids with a bunch of bad advice and phony American Dream bullshit like yours.”

“That’s it, son. I’ve about had it with your smart lip. I ain’t going to be talked about like that by some young punk.”

Ivory glanced up at the Eye in the Sky and signaled with discreet sleight of hand. Henry kicked his stool back and stood up. The Eastern Europeans looked on with a succulent newfound interest in their neighbors. Amelia ducked down in her chair.

“You son of a bitch,” Henry said as he uncorked a right cross. The old coot filled up with spit and vinegar from some hidden reserve tank. There was a little fire in his half-dead grey eyes. Art was too stunned to move. He saw the fist coming in slow motion – fairly close to actual speed in this instance – but it still connected square with the orbital bone over his left eye.

“Ow,” Art shouted. “You old fucker.”

Henry was on his way over Amelia’s stool to jump on Art when two massive men in suits appeared from nowhere, grabbed him under each arm, and dragged him through a nearby door leading to the bowels of the casino before he had a chance to disturb any of the other tables.

“Poor Henry. That his last strike. Guess we won’t be seeing him anymore, huh, Ivory?”

“No, Madame Chang, it doesn’t seem so,” Ivory said.

Amelia fussed over Art’s eye with a wet napkin. “You’re going to have a shiner in the morning.”

“I can’t believe I got attacked by a World War II vet. Sensitive old bastard.”

“Oh, he not really World War II vet,” Madame Chang said. “He just look that old. Drink too much. Bad liver. He really a Vietnam War veteran, but he embarrassed about his war so he steal good war he can brag about.”

“How do you know that?”

“I sleep with him about 15 years ago. I see his Veteran I.D. card. He only 65 years old.”

Art and Amelia’s mouths hung open.

“What?” Madame Chang looked offended. “Henry very charming then. He have all his teeth then, too.”

Ivory chuckled and started to deal a new hand.

“Well, I guess I feel a little better then. Henry packs a punch.” Art had taken the wet napkin from Amelia and was holding it to his forehead.

Ivory held his hand up and signaled a cocktail waitress. “Darlene,” he said. “This man’s going to need a whiskey. Top shelf, please. Let the boss know who it’s for. He’ll understand.”

Darlene returned a minute later with a tumbler filled with three fingers of beautiful deep amber whiskey. “What is it?” Art asked as he handed her a \$1 chip.

“Johnnie Walker,” she said.

Art took a sip. It wasn’t like any Johnnie Walker he had tasted. Neither Red nor Black. Darlene was already gone. He whipped his head around to Ivory. The old man let out a deep, soulful laugh.

“Taste a little Blue?”

“Seriously?” Art said.

“You feeling better, sir?”

“Hell yeah. Let’s play.”

Ivory resumed dealing, his measured hands acting out a story with every game. Ivory was giving as good as he got, but somehow Madame Chang’s chips continued to stack higher. Even after trading in \$5 chips for \$25 ones and a few \$25s for \$100s.

“You know how much money you lost tonight?” she said, blowing smoke out the side of her mouth away from the table.

“We’re up about a hundred, actually,” Art said.

“No,” Madame Chang insisted. “You losing money. You play side bet, you be up \$300 right now. Side bet good to us tonight. You play Lucky Ladies.”

“I’m not a big fan of side bets. Those are sucker bets. No offense.”

Madame Chang gave Art an ornery look. It wasn’t much different than her standard resting face.

“You know, it’s none of my business, sir,” Ivory said. “But Madame Chang don’t dole out advice very often. She must like you. I’d consider listening to her.”

“You like me?”

Her jowls and pouty lips ratcheted down another degree, making her stare that much more ornery. “Madame Chang like anyone who get rid of Henry. Besides, you tell him right. Old

Americans all full of their own bullshit. Now, you going to play side bet or not? Ivory slow enough already. Don't waste my time."

"I'll play." Art put down \$5 chips on the Lucky Ladies circle at his base and the one in front of Amelia. Ivory promptly dealt a 19 and an 11. Ivory scooped up the \$10. Art doubled down on the 11 and got stuck with a 16. Ivory then flipped an ace against the nine showing. The quickest \$40 Art had lost all night.

"See, side bets just aren't for me."

"Play again." Madame Chang's scowl deepened.

Art played again. No dice. Another \$10 gone. "I think that's it for me," he said.

"Play again."

"I don't know, Madame Chang. I can't keep bleeding chips."

"I've never seen Madame Chang be wrong before about something like this," Ivory said.

"But it's up to you, sir. I know what I'd do."

"Alright then. Here we go, Lucky Ladies."

Ivory dealt the first round of cards. He paused for a long moment over the card that was headed for Amelia's base. "Hmm," he said, and slapped down a queen of hearts.

"Lucky Lady. Lucky Lady," Madame Chang said. She latched on to Art's left arm with both hands. He felt her claw-like nails dig in. Ivory then threw down a jack of clubs in front of Art. "Ooh, Ivory treat you good now. See?"

Ivory felt the moment and dealt the next four cards with almost the speed of a normal dealer, until he came back to the spot in front of Amelia. He ran his fingers along the edge of the next card in the shoe and carefully extracted it. He didn't lift it to look at it, but held it down against the table.

"Let's look at it together," he said. Even the Eastern Europeans were rapt. They leaned in over the table. Ivory closed his eyes and lifted the card up over his head, then slapped it down in front of Amelia.

“Lucky Ladies! Lucky Ladies,” Madame Chang shouted. The Eastern European couple threw their arms in the air and shouted in triumph before regaining their previous state of surly composure. Amelia jumped out of her seat and kissed Art on the crown of his balding head. Art himself grinned from ear to ear and gave high fives to Madame Chang and the Eastern Europeans.

For good measure, Ivory then threw down the 10 of clubs on top of the jack of clubs in front of Art. That’s \$45 for the suited 20 and \$625 for the Lucky Ladies. It won’t pay the mortgage, but it sure felt good.

“See. I tell you. Lucky Ladies were ready to pay.” Madame Chang cracked a smile for the first time all night. It was a tortured thing.

“I don’t understand how you’re even allowed in the casino. You’re amazing. You must rob them blind.”

“Oh, no. I down \$20,000 this year. I not so lucky. But it’s my husband’s money. Who cares?”

I’ve been taking advice to gamble on a stupid side bet from a degenerate, Art thought. Luck, who says it’s not real?

Over Madame Chang’s protest – she insisted the Lucky Ladies were still paying – Art and Amelia bowed out, shook everyone’s hands at the table and tipped Ivory with a \$25 chip.

“Enjoy your life,” Ivory said. He let out a quiet old man’s chuckle as he set his eyes back down at the table to dawdle his way through the next hand.

“I’m so happy,” Amelia said as they walked out of the crisp artificial Bally’s air into the balmy early morning dark. It was prime time on the Strip. The streets still teemed.

“I know. Winning’s fun.”

“No, not about that, dummy. What you said to Henry. You listened to me. What I said in The Dalles. About that generation, and the awful things they did that everyone says are so great now. I know you don’t agree with me completely, but you listened.”

Art stuffed the new roll of \$100s and \$20s in his pocket and took Amelia's hand.

“Remind me to tell you about the nuclear test range up north of here some time.”

### **The Third Daydream (US 91N Cruising the Vegas Strip)**

Art was only marginally awake and mostly drunk after their long night in the casino, but semantics on the definition of ‘daydream’ aside, strange vibrations circulated through the cab as it cruised past the Strip's flashing neon lights, setting his mind far adrift into new chapters of life.

\*

He is walking side-by-side with Amelia through an endless rolling field of golden wheat, large canvas bags slung over their shoulders and hung against their hips. The wheat is ready for harvest, heads bobbing heavily in the light breeze. Rays of sunshine pierce the air through a British sky, swords of light lancing the field. The heads of wheat capture the sun and glow like giant fireflies.

It is these heads that Art and Amelia pick. The sunshine sticks to the wheat as they are tossed into the sacks. The open mouths of the canvas bags glow like pots of gold. Some of the light sticks to Amelia's fingers so that her hands are cast in a subtle glow. She tries to wipe it off on her simple sundress and titters when she sees the light spread across the fabric. Soon she is cast in an aura of September light. She is a part of the field of gold that signals the end of one season and the start of a new.

## Chapter 10 - Hot Hot Heat on U.S. 93W

Mid-June saw what was perhaps the most brutal heat wave in American history descend across the entire Southwest. Las Vegas was the cosmopolitan bull's eye of this wretched high pressure (unless, of course, anyone defined Baker as cosmopolitan).

Art considered it his sworn duty to monitor all weather developments religiously. The forecast did not escape him, but numbers like 118 and 119 simply did not compute in his Upper Midwesterner mind. They were nonsense. Poppycock. Flimflam. He felt the sun scorch his scalp at 105 degrees the day he arrived in Vegas. It was hot, but it wasn't that bad. He recited the local's mantra: "but it's a dry heat." He had no idea the hottest air temperature ever recorded in Las Vegas was 119 degrees.

He knew an egg would fry at 158 degrees, something he had looked up as a kid after hearing his grandma say one summer long ago that it was hot enough fry an egg outside. He might have found it interesting, then, that at a 115-degree air temperature, blacktop parking lots will push 165. Hot enough to burn the pad on a dog's foot in less than a minute. A human's bare foot in just a few seconds.

Art and Amelia awoke late the morning after scoring big on the Prophecy of Madame Chang to the feeling that they were baked clams. Their liquored-up juices from the night before had evaporated into the universe. Art stumbled out into the living room where he was assaulted by an angry sun flooding vulgar rays of hot light through the living room's glass walls. The tower's central AC was overwhelmed, reduced to spitting lukewarm air out of the vents. Art checked the current temperature outside. It was 108 at 11 a.m. The mercury peaked at 111 that day.

They made an executive decision right then. It's too damn hot. We've got to bail. Abort Mission Vegas. They made a plan to escape to the Grand Canyon early the next morning, where the forecast was only mid- to upper 90s. Kid's stuff.

That day, the day they left for the Grand Canyon, was the scorcher of all scorchers. Just west of Vegas in Death Valley, the thermometer touched 130 degrees – the second highest temperature ever recorded in the hottest place on earth. Vegas hit 118, but the desert to the east around Lake Mead (aka the escape route down U.S. 93) touched 120. Airplanes were grounded because of the heat's impact on air density. The Southwest was literally a blast furnace. The heat turned everyone into evangelists prophesying the Apocalypse. Whether in the skin of a Jesus Freak or a climate change activist, they all shouted “the end is near.”

Art and Amelia were neither. They were pragmatists. Pragmatists don't invite the end, they resist it, one step at a time. They set their alarm clock for 6 a.m. to get out of Dodge before the going got toasty.

But their plan was too late.

To truly escape the debilitating, tire-melting heat on the highways, Art would have needed to pick Amelia up and keep driving east the moment he arrived in Vegas. The condo tower's lurching, dying central AC kept their unit down in the mid-80s, but the overnight low was only 96. So much for those cold desert nights. The pavement never released its heat. The surface of U.S. 93 was cooking at 110 within minutes of the sun peeking over the horizon. By the time Art was clenched-hands-white-knuckle steering the Cabrio down the highway past the Hoover Dam, it was 10 a.m. The call of cold showers and one last good Vegas meal delayed their departure. It was 106. The pavement was 130. And rising.

“This is crazy,” Amelia said. “Should we go back? Wait it out? This old girl's good, but she's not that good.” She was referring to the Cabrio, but she might as well have been referring to herself. Amelia was already regretting her mandate of no air conditioning. Her visions of the

Cabrio's engine exploding and being stranded on the side of the highway were being blurred by sweatsalt stinging her eyes.

"No, no, she can do it. Let's do it." Art was all hope, no conviction, driving on the assumption good karma would prevent the universe from allowing pavement to cook his organs in boiling blood.

"Can tires melt?" The fresh tatters of trucker tires lining U.S. 93 seemed to answer Amelia's question. Art preferred not to answer. Luck only favors the ignorant.

The situation intensified through Arizona's Sacramento Valley as U.S. 93 tilted to the southeast. The temperature had crossed 110 when the graveyard of intrepid fools began to appear. Tractor-trailers, RVs, family vans and sedans alike – none were spared the wrath. One or two casualties at first. Within a few miles, the death toll was quickly rising from the dozens toward 100. They lined the sides of the highway like open caskets, hoods propped up, family and friends viewing their dearly deceased engines.

"This is a disaster," Amelia said.

"Don't worry. We got the oil changed yesterday. They checked the fluid levels." Art didn't know what the hell that even meant. But it sounded good. "You're just tense because you're so hot. Let's run the AC for a little bit."

Amelia didn't have the will to resist. They rolled the windows up and let it fly.

The death toll continued to mount outside. People sat on the super-heated breakdown lane, white T-shirts and towels covering their heads, with nothing to do but wait until their engines cooled down. The carnage tore Art between driving at a reasonable speed to protect the engine and flooring it to get the hell out of that desert as soon as possible. He pulled over at a gas station on the outskirts of Dolan Springs (population 2,280) and bought three one-gallon jugs of water. He popped the hood and poured the first gallon on the engine. The engine spat every drop back at him in the form of a sizzling column of steam. He spread the second gallon around everything under the hood, causing a second steam bath. Impurities melted out of his

open pores. By the time he poured the third gallon, some of the water actually managed to stay in liquid form long enough to slosh onto the pavement below the car. They left the Cabrio parked in the shade with the hood up and went inside to eat an ice cream.

“Can you explain to me why in the hell we didn’t do the southern leg of this trip first?” Amelia said.

“I am not prepared to comment on that query, ma’am.”

Easing back onto 93S at low speed, they could see the battered state of the buckled concrete. The heat was literally causing great sores to burst open in the road. Potholes from hell. One more obstacle for the mighty Cabrio. Why not? One drop of a tire into a gaping road fissure was sure to end that sweet, laboring little VW’s run against the odds and sanity. Art and Amelia went into lookout mode and were so focused on the cracking road, neither saw the massive storm cloud brewing up ahead over Kingman.

In their defense, the difference of hue between the brooding grey cloud and the white sun-blached sky was not much. The heat somehow blended all colors, dried out any vibrancy. The first time the thunder rumbled, they assumed it was an 18-wheeler exploding. The second rumble of thunder lifted their heads from the road to the sky.

They stared at it. Grey against white, blended at the edges with the thick haze of dust mixed with heat.

“Is that?” Amelia asked.

“Is it even possible?” Art appended.

The sky answered. A bolt of whiteblue lightning stung the hilltops holding Kingman high above the scorching valley.

“Rain! Rain! Thank God! Hallelujah!” They exalted. They found religion, Church of the Rain God. They cheered like children at snack time.

As they got closer, the storm cloud shed the gown of haze and revealed its true menacing darkness. It swirled over their heads as they began to ascend the gradual 600-foot incline up the

Cerbat Mountains. Bolts of lightning struck the hills up ahead to the left and right of the highway with unimpeded clarity. They appeared on the verge of entering a mighty storm. They waited for the rain to drop as the Cabrio climbed.

Lightning flashed and a crack of thunder boomed in tandem. One single, heavy, fat globule of rain thudded against the center of the windshield. But as they reached the plateau marking the start of Kingman proper, the dark lower clouds parted, leaving a pallid grey rainless cloud cover.

“Well, shit,” Art said. “That was anticlimactic.”

“We should turn the AC off. Let’s open the windows again.”

They did, then marveled at the feeling on their skin. The storm cloud. The elevation change. Something. Something had broken the heat. It was 15 degrees cooler. Upper 90s felt like Scotland in June. Theory of relativity. Their skin cherished the sensation of a refreshing breeze.

The Cabrio was even more appreciative. U.S. 93 merged with I-40, which had been shaded under cloud all day. Its surface was an engine-preserving 30 degrees cooler than the road in the valley below.

Pockets of sunshine burst through ballooning cumulonimbus clouds as far as the eye could see to the east. The intensity of the ride was turned off with the AC.

The heat had broken. It had finally broken.

The Cabrio barreled east. The Grand Canyon opened its gaping maw somewhere in the distance – the chasm so vast it has left millions in awe of the immense scale of the world, yet is still not big enough to hold the infinite possibilities of even one life.