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57,000 words

Modern Anamorphic

a novel, by Daniel Hamilton

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“L.A. is where you confront the objective fact that you mean nothing. It’s you and a bunch of parking lots. Los Angeles is the confrontation with the void.”

-Geoff Manaugh

To Believe

Zelda finally made it out to Rialto a year and a half after Milton disappeared. The Wal Mart security guard had called CHP because the car, well back in the corner of the lot where all the strange nomads and fuckups slept in their shattered Rivieras and rust-mosaicced teardrop trailers, hadn't moved since it got there, and they usually didn't give a shit, but a year and a half is a long time. It had collected a half inch of tireblack from the Pasadena Freeway, up above, where everyone drove east fast as they could into better lives.

They had to clear off the layer of dust to read the VIN. The trooper on the phone said that she was his emergency contact number. She said she hadn't spoken to him in years. "Come get it," they said, "or we'll impound it and it'll end up in China for slag. There's a bunch of crap in the backseat. Some of it looks expensive."

Zelda called the last number that she had for him three times in a row, and, though she had promised that would be it, twice more that night, three beers in because she didn't have enough money for the hydrocodone. Everything still felt strange in her left hand–taking more effort, more concentration, even the numbers on the telephone seeming out of order, arranged wrong, as though she had, all these years, had the progression from one to nine backwards.

Count down, not up. When she tried to flex her right index finger it wouldn't move. She could see the wrist quivering at mildest exertion.

The next day was pickups for a feature she'd shot that spring, and she called Katy Culpeper to ask if they could split the pay 70/30, instead of 50/50. "I need the money," she said.

"Zelda, we all need the money," Katy said. "I mean...we already made the agreement."

"I know," Zelda said.

"How much is the surgery?"

"It's a lot," Zelda said.

"I'm not unsympathetic," Katy said. "I'm not trying to be mean."

"I know."

"But I'll end up doing all the work and you know it."

"See you tomorrow," Zelda said. She closed the phone, and the motion–simple, never before considered, never before requiring anything like effort–seemed not to come from her own body, but from some other force or will, some ghost inhabitant nestled into her, now, from the elbow down. "At least it wasn't your eyes," her mother had said. "You *really* need those for your work."

From the balcony the yellow city yawned away south into the gloom. Sunset was all taillights from Glendale down and in the alleyway the young neighbor, nineteen, maybe, must have been talking to her agent, because she said, "But I got new headshots and everything." A helicopter made orbits far away over the plain, silent, searchlights angled through the night smog like collapsing towers.

Katy Culpeper wound up doing all the work because when Zelda tried to lift the camera out of the case with her one good hand she instinctively went to swing it into the other–the motion, as all tradesman's motions, acquired and expert and natural as the striking of a match–and the fingers folded back with no force at all and the camera dropped three feet right onto the concrete. Nobody saw but Katy and the loader and the loader said, "Holy shit."

"It's fine," Zelda said. "It's a 535. It's a brick."

"That's how you spend two hundred fifty grand of someone else's money," the loader said.

"It's fine," Zelda said. "It's fine." She bent to lift the camera.

"I'll do it," Katy said.

"Don't tell anyone," Zelda said.

"It looks fine," Katy said.

"Don't tell anyone."

And so for the first two hours of the day, as all around her the technicians swaggered and swarmed and made shows of carrying heavy objects, and the makeup girls applied finer and finer and finer gradients of blush to the young actresses who sat, immobile as carved saints, in what few pools of light could be found in the dark soundstage, and the moneymen came and went and asked why it took so many people to light one scene, and Katy carried and assembled and modified and cleaned and prepared the camera that hung, now, from the arm of a telescoping crane–Zelda only sat, and watched. She had nothing to do. Her assistants were skilled enough. She had trained them well. They were smart and eager. They were getting better than her, and

Katy was young, and blonde and gorgeous, and a gaggle of grips followed after her wherever she went, asking if they could get her anything.

"No thank you, boys," Katy would say.

"An apple box?" they would say.

"That's very sweet."

"Do you need any sandbags?"

"I have several already."

"How about a stinger?"

"I'll be sure to let you know." And Katy would smile and be gracious and polite–no tomboy, no fallback always to brash and assertive, no prickly need to scour out her own patch of ground in the boys' club. Zelda had scolded her, once, when Katy was even younger, for wearing a cotton dress to a night exterior in Bellflower–but then the cinematographer, fifty-two, with still the mildest Polish accent despite decades of trying to suppress it, said, "Katy Culpeper, you are a very beautiful woman. It is very nice to see a woman who can work hard and still be very beautiful." Zelda never worked for him again, to make a point. The next year he won an Oscar and did not answer when she called to congratulate him.

Zelda tried to count the number of shows back to then but could not–May? September? It was right before Milton left, but she hadn't been talking to him then anyway–her whole rearview just one yearslong blur of straight-to-cable zombie movies, never-finished-let-alone-never-released indie features, back-to-backs in the desert for six months, sleeping in weird Lancaster motels inhabited only by film crews and methadone ladies who said, when they came

to stand in the parking lot, and smoke, and watch The Movies be made: “I was an actress a few times. Bit parts, you know. Anyway, it was a long time ago.”

In the soundstage the assistant director said, “Rehearsal in five.”

“I need ten,” said the gaffer.

“Rehearsal in seven,” said the assistant director.

“When I tell you ten I mean ten,” said the gaffer.

“Camera’s set,” Zelda said, sitting on her crate, and the AD did not seem to notice.

She kept catching herself, without realizing it, cradling her bad hand in the other, as some wounded prey animal, as though gentleness or comfort were enough to reattach three severed carpal tendons and splice back together the dying median nerve that even now coiled and shrank back into her arm.

Up on the crane, the camera turned and spun through its axes, and the operator, with the easiest and most expert manipulation of his control wheels, threw it out over the scene, rotated, held it hanging upside down in space like a trapeze swinger. One of the PAs lurking behind him grinned and said, “Cool.” Zelda sat motionless on her small wooden crate.

When they rolled the camera she held her small radio transceiver and turned its wheel and up on the crane a little motor attached to the lens matched her movements. That was all that she did, and when they cut, it was not her, but Katy, who said, “We need to reload,” and when the crane came down Katy took the film magazine from the camera and she slipped the new one on and she threaded the film through the circuitous inside of the machine and even from a distance Zelda knew she had done it just right.

They finished out the pickups with the same arrangement but on the last day eating lunch on the truck outside the soundstage Katy said, "Zelda, I was happy to help you out, but I don't think I can work for half rates anymore."

"I know," Zelda said. "Thank you for doing it, this time."

"Can't you ask your parents?" Katy said.

"No, Katy, I can't ask my parents."

"How much is the surgery?"

"Ninety grand," she said.

"The union will help you. I know they will. They're good people."

"We'll see," Zelda said. "They're all faceless gestapo bureaucrats so far."

"You don't have to be so mean all the time," Katy said.

"I'm not mean," Zelda said. "I'm humorously armored against the blows of life. You'll figure out the difference someday, sweetie."

Katy hit the lift gate and rode it to the top and when the whine of the motor cut out she said, "I got offered a feature." She was silent for a long time, and then said, "As a First."

"Who's it for?"

"Kristof."

"I was just thinking it had been a while since he called me," Zelda said.

"It's not like that. He knows you need some time off."

"Katy, I'm proud of you," Zelda said. "You're doing good. You're ready."

"You and Milton trained me right," Katy said.

"Milton only ever taught you bad habits and how to crack a beer on the edge of a doorsill."

"Have you heard from him?"

"No," Zelda said. "Where are you shooting?"

Katy tried not to smile. "It's in Mallorca."

"God damn it now I'm less proud of you," Zelda said. "Let's go back in before I beat you to death with my floppy hand. Are you fucking kidding me? Mallorca? The nerve's cut, you know, I can't feel pain. I could slap you with this thing all day."

Katy laughed and jumped from the truck and pulled the rolling gate down and hit the ground and latched it in one motion. When the loader threw her the keys, she caught them, and she grinned, and she held the stage door open for Zelda, who for the rest of the day sat on her crate in silence, watching the movement of the crane, watching the movement of the actors, turning her one working wrist, slightly, precisely, and only ever at the right time.

At the end of the day she did not pack anything away, and she did not lift any heavy cases, and she did not load or drive the five-ton, and she drove home in the dark up into Echo Park steering with her knee when she had to use her left hand on the gearshift, and when–force of habit–she reached for the doorhandle and her hand just flopped limply against the lever she shouted and she hit the window with her good hand and she hit it again, and again, she leaned against the horn and she tore the sunvisor–loose, already, for years, because it was a cheap car, and because all plastic cracks and crumbles, and that had never bothered her before, because it was just a car, and no measure of success, and so to her had never before been anything like an emblem of failure but now she tore it off its mount and threw it against the dashboard and cursed

and when she gritted her teeth hard enough to keep her eyes from watering up the neighbor girl was there in the alley, on her phone, watching Zelda in the car. Zelda swallowed, and she opened the door with her left hand, and she stepped–surefooted, she hoped–and she strode, purposefully, forcefully–she hoped–up the shattered concrete hillside stairs to her apartment, and behind her the girl said, into her phone, “Dad, I need more money.”

For a week, Zelda did nothing–she sat on the balcony, for hours, looking hardly at anything, and she left the house only to walk down to the Bolivian grocery on Paul Terrace (”Paul!” Milton had screamed into the dark one night, crossing the road, drunk, Zelda laughing and catching the eye of the girl in the sailor costume he was after, who turned out to be a lesbian)–and she wrote Jenny an e-mail, with her right hand, slowly, glyph by glyph, summoning all exertable force only to hold her ring finger steady enough to push down against the tiny scissor spring of the keys, and the e-mail said, finally, “how is school, i hope you’re doing okay, mom says hi, you know i hate poor punctuation but i’m trying to type with the hand and i can’t use the shift key, write me more often,” but Jenny would not write her back for eight months. She got two job offers and declined them both. “I’m having some health problems,” she said. “Nothing serious. I’ll be in prime shape for the next gig. Trout’s honor.”

Luke was in Big Sur with his boyfriend for a week and a half so she got into his liquor and did not worry about how she was going to replace it–and pay him back the share of rent she’d borrowed–before then. She’d get some money. She’d work something out. She was resourceful. She was adaptable. She was tough and quick on her feet, and it wasn’t her feet that needed the surgery. She would be fine.

She threw the bottle from the balcony in the dark, slung weird–even throwing, somehow, so learned a motion, that she now had to figure out how to do backwards–and the glass breaking echoed up into the ragged hill above the apartment. “Shut the fuck up,” somebody yelled into the night.

Shannon told her that she got orlistat off-prescription for cheap at a free clinic down off Bonnie Brae in Westlake, so Zelda drove down, and when at a stoplight she saw a dumpster on the corner she took the sunvisor from the dashboard and winged it in but it went wide. A man was watching from the opposite corner, October so still hot enough but he was swaddled in ragged blankets and what might once have been painter’s tarps, and he leaned against a shopping cart piled with the last, least derelict of all his possessions, and he grinned through his gray and wild beard and said, “Girl, missed it by a mile.” She cocked her glasses at him and he shouted, “We all gotta practice sometimes.” She gave him a thumbs up with her good hand and drove off.

In the waiting room a multivaried study in human malady spilled from the chairs and the entryway and onto the floors and the hallways, where people stood, or leaned, or slept, because there was no room. The air must have been thick with infectious agents, bright and flourishing in their preferred environment–passing from host to host, there, in that tiny clinic, which threatened, for Zelda, to reveal malignant fears and presumptions, visions of squat huts perched at the edge of some island given over and abandoned to the lepers and the sick and the nearly-destroyed. This is not what the modern world looks like, she almost thought–but she knew better than that. In Daramshala there had been a few sick children, but even there, only a few. She thought of plague wards and the collapse of civilization, and so she leaned against the wall in the

least crowded corner, and she put her head back, and all around her pained, imploring speech in so many languages she almost felt, in those groaning, slurred vowels, like she had heard the first words–the common tongue. A man across from her–Colombian, she guessed–gestured to his head when he caught her eye. “It hurts,” he said. And she nodded.

“I’m sorry.”

While she was waiting the nurses threw open the dark glass doors–outside, it was afternoon, and the sun, lowering into the marine layer, cast everything gold, palm trees, the far distant edges of the Santa Monicas bearing west–and an ambulance pulled onto the sidewalk with its lights on and the paramedics pulled a man out and left him on the sidewalk and one of them kissed a pretty nurse on the cheek and said a few sentences in Spanish and then the ambulance vanished. When the nurses brought the man in he had blood dried and black and thick with dirt and sawdust from his neck down to his waist, his shirt cut open by the paramedics’ scissors. They did not have a gurney so they just dragged the man into the back.

“He is not so bad,” the man across from her said. “If he was very bad they would take him to the hospital, but there they would find where he lived, you know, for some money. Here they can leave him.”

The nurses looked over her wrist and her form and they ran their fingers along the swollen, loose outlines of her lumbrical muscles and they brought in the one who spoke English and told her that they were out of opiates but they could give her a half box of the rofecoxib they still had left over from before it was recalled. “Is it safe?” Zelda asked.

“Are you smart?” the nurse asked.

“Most of the time.”

"Then it's safe most of the time. They could do the surgery in Mexico for not a lot of money. I know a clinic down in Torréon. Do you want to know how to contact them?"

"My passport's expired," Zelda said.

"Do you need to talk to someone about how it happened?"

"That question pisses me off. It was an accident."

"Just be careful," the nurse said.

"It happens by accident sometimes, you know."

"Not as often as not by accident," the nurse said, standing. "What are you doing here?"

"What do you mean?"

"This is not your place," the nurse said.

"I don't have insurance," Zelda said.

"That's not what I mean. You're not so unlucky, that you need this place, are you?"

"I don't know."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a First Assistant Camera."

"You're a photographer?"

"I work in the movies."

"Like the Hollywood movies?"

"I guess."

The nurse looked at her. "Who told you about this place?"

"A friend."

"I don't like girls coming in here to get anorexia pills or because you try to kill yourself. These people, they have nowhere else. You have somewhere else. Go there. Do not take from these people. You have other choices. These people, they come here only because they don't have other choices."

"I don't have anywhere else."

"I don't believe you," the nurse said, and she gave her the painkillers.

Shannon had an opening in Abbott Kinney and some drunk screenwriter was following her around all night trying to be charming– "It's just like that scene from Ghostbusters II!" he kept saying–and all of Shannon's friends were models. She drank four glasses of wine and she told the screenwriter that she'd just seen David Mamet heading for the bathroom. On the roof she looked south at the big jets heading out over the ocean for other and distant worlds, and she hadn't smelled the ocean in months, and of course–well, watching airplanes, by the sea, made her think of Milton. She called him again but now it said the number was not valid. When she left she told Shannon they were beautiful–and the paintings were beautiful, she supposed, black-blasted landscapes empty but for small crystal goblets, abandoned in the wastes, and volcanoes firing magma out over fields of pastel dresses, arranged there, as if to await the fire–but Zelda had no stomach left for abstractions, or subtleties, or symbols. She drove home with a BAC well above the legal limit and a half box of a very-dark-indeed-shade-of-graymarket COX-2 inhibitors in the backseat, but it was L.A., and the only cops she saw hurtled past in the carpool at a thousand miles an hour, because out there people were dying.

The pills knocked her out for a day and a half and sometime in there an 805 area code tried to get her but she ignored it, once, twice, and then on Thursday she came out of it as out of fever-dreams and she went into the backyard and stole chard from the garden Luke had left untended and wild since planting in March. She figured out how to hold the stalk down between her forearm and the spindle of a towel holder and she didn't worry too much about cutting herself because she knew, now, where all the important veins and arteries and ligaments ran. Annika called just as the burners finally lit. When she said her name a dog was barking in the background.

"Wow," Zelda said. "Long time."

"Do you remember me?" she said.

"Of course," Zelda said.

"When's the last time we saw each other?"

"Your Derby party that one year, I think."

"Oh, I forgot about that," Annika said. "Oh. Oh, when they shot the horse. Oh no, didn't she break her wrist?"

"More like a knuckle, I think," Zelda said.

"Oh, God," Annika said. "I don't normally need much reason to drink bourbon, but yes, that was a hard night."

"It was pretty sad," Zelda said.

"Well, how are you doing?"

"I'm fine," Zelda said.

"Are you still in the movies?"

"Yeah. Taking a break. Hurt my hand."

"Oh, oh no...are you alright?"

"No big seal. Nothing I can't handle. How are you?"

"I'm great!" Annika said. "Yeah, I'm great! I'm in Santa Barbara."

"No wonder you're great," Zelda said.

Annika laughed, effusive with social graces. "Well, I can't complain."

"The cops called me about Milton's car last week. It's in a parking lot in Rialto."

"I know," Annika said.

"How do you know?"

"They called me too. He put my name on a form, in college I think."

"I don't really have the time to go take care of his crap," Zelda said. "You shouldn't either, when he asks you, but that's not my business."

"I know you two had a falling out."

"We didn't have a falling out. We just didn't want to be friends anymore."

"Well–"

"Have you talked to him?"

"Yeah," Annika said.

And Zelda was surprised, then–charted in her head as this conversation had been, so sure that, when he left, if he ever came back, or if he ever reached back, it would have been to her, and since she had not heard from him, surely vanished he must be, either to Texas or Latvia or wherever the hell, for a girl, or into his own bullshit, or into the opaque, consumptive powers of his illness, that she had only ever seen from the outside, that she had only ever caught in

refracting glimpses when he slipped and let his armor down, and then she saw him never touching certain objects, or vanishing, even on movie sets, into bathrooms for fifteen minutes, smelling of bleach when he returned–anyway. She had always thought she would remain his lodestone. She felt pain under her collarbone.

"He's doing well," Annika said. "He's in Tennessee."

"He's in Tennessee?"

"For a little while."

"Oh."

"Anyway, he called me, and he asked me to call you...because...well, he needs you to do him a favor."

"Annika...."

"Well, he really needs the money, so he was wondering if you could go sort through his car, and clean it out and maybe sell some things–"

"Annika–"

"–and maybe sell the car to a junkyard or something because he thinks the engine is...well."

"It's not really fair of him to ask that. I haven't talked to him in two years."

"I know, but, you know–"

"And he could have asked me himself, you know. Obviously he gave you my number."

"I know, I know, he's...well, I don't think he'd ask if he didn't need it."

"Why can't you do it?"

"I'm going to Vancouver tomorrow, for a couple months."

"For what?"

"It's an engagement present."

"Oh."

"Yeah, I'm...well, the wedding's in Ojai! You should come. It'd be great to see you!"

"Annika, that's sweet, but you don't have to."

"He thinks the car'll be gone by the time I get back."

"Why'd he just leave it there if he needs the stuff?"

"I don't think he thought it through that far."

"I'll think about it."

"I can tell him to call you, and you two can talk...."

"It's fine. I'd rather deal with you. If I do it, can I send you the money?"

"Well. Sure. I mean, I'd get it when I get back..."

"He can bear a little interest, I think. Anyway. I'll let you know."

"He's very sorry."

"It was good to talk to you, Annika."

"Zelda..." she said, and Zelda stopped, and she looked at her wrist, and tried to rotate it until a shiver grew in her elbow and she almost threw up.

"Yes?" she said finally.

"I cleaned out his apartment. It was very hard. I can't do it again."

"Okay."

"The car will be the same."

"I know," Zelda said.

"I'm sorry."

"I don't blame you. You helped him a lot."

"So did you," Annika said.

"No I didn't," Zelda said. "But that's not really the point. I'll let you know if I go."

She knew only vaguely where Rialto was–even Milton, who, every time she called to ask if he wanted to hang out, would say, "Sure, give me two hours to get back," because he was always wandering in whatever car he had yet to crash that city at all hours of the night, pretending himself a cartographer of discovered kingdoms, even he did not know *all* the names on a map of the L.A. Basin. For a few days she gave this to herself as an excuse not to go; who knows where Rialto is? It's probably awful. It's probably bleak. It's probably some post-industrial hellscape and the car is a trick they use to lure valiant young cameragirls to back alleys to be eaten by cannibals.

After that she found more practical objections. Gas was $4.45 a gallon that fall. She didn't owe him anything–in point of fact, as near as she could remember, Milton owed her three or four hundred dollars, but she could not remember for what. It was dangerous to drive with her hand fucked up. She was afraid her Kia would fly apart somewhere around Monrovia and leave her stranded forever at the edge of civilization, begging exurban exiles for directions back to Echo Park, but she would be lost there beyond all eternities, and they'd never hire her at Trader Joe's, because who wants to buy broccoli from that scowl?

The objection that she finally settled on, though, was that she just did not want to, that old doors long closed should remain closed, that friendships failed for reasons, that they had always

been wildly corrosive to each other, elaborating and seizing on and bringing out in each other all the wrong impulses, towards self-aggrandizement, towards selfishness, towards dropping it all to jump in the car at three in the morning, and just throwing it into gear, barreling for who knows where–

One night they made it out to the Salton Sea and in the prehistoric dark of the insane desert country out there they stumbled down to the shore and felt nameless things crunching underfoot where they walked and the odors of wild and organic chemistries churning up from the water that they knew, by sound only, lapped in the dark. They slept in the car with lightning sparking brushfires in the Santa Rosas that flared ragged and gold before the rain drowned them out, and when they woke in the morning they went down to the shore to find it five inches thick with a crust of dead tilapia, etched forever in either direction, and they could see the footprints they had made in the skeletons of the fish where they wandered and shouted the night before.

Once for a job they did the back way to Salt Lake in nine hours flat because they did a hundred and twenty all through Nevada in his fast new car, Zelda watching for the moon over the black basin-and-range to glimmer in the distant reflectors of any highway patrolman waiting out there, stalwart and humorless and incapable of understanding that the desert is there to be crossed, and quickly, but no strobes came after them. A young intern fell in love with him and Zelda met a librarian with a motorcycle so they each got to have brief love affairs. They worked for five days and on the night of the fifth there were rats skittering in the walls of the parking garage and Milton panicked and lost it and had to wash his hands and in the bathroom he told her that he had to go. Zelda invented a sister for him and got her into a car crash so he would have an excuse to take off. “He’s very close to his sister,” she said to the producers, and to the intern,

explaining why he had, without a word, disappeared into the night. “He’s very upset.” He’d kissed her on the forehead when he left and he didn’t make it back to L.A. for eight weeks.

Once they stopped in the Siskiyous in December, stars lighting far Shasta and the ring of galaxy bright and definite as milk in water, and when he was pissing in the snow Zelda said that she was pregnant. “Really?” he said. “Carly’s pregnant too. You guys should have your abortions together.” She and Carly–his girlfriend of the month, whom she never heard of again–did not have their abortions together, but Milton took Zelda to the clinic in Seattle, and he kissed her–on the forehead–before she went in. He also took the bottle from her on the third night, when it was time. “We’re not ready,” he said. “We’re too young. We’re not there yet. Someday you will have strong daughters who have a better world and can do anything, anything, they’ll be able to do anything at all. I can be their godfather. But not yet. Someday, but not yet.”

This objection lasted for three days, three days spent hazed and alone and alternating between intoxication and stupor, and in those three days she kept repeating to herself, as a mantra, that she would not go, that she would not go, that she would not go–imbuing the decision with power well beyond the physical realities of its execution or inexecution, as though contained within Milton’s abandoned car were not just whatever final possessions he had deemed sacrificial–but the sacrifice itself, that here she was, still trying, all these years later, and she could not come so close to someone else who had tried, so hard, for so long, and who had burned out, who had gone mad, who had vanished, into the dark. To touch such a talisman was surely to be consumed by it.

For a month after he disappeared everyone talked about it, and then, as though signal had been passed by means unknown from cameraperson to cameraperson until the whole of the

industry and the city and the endeavor itself decided, forgotten. No one ever asked about him, anymore. No one ever wondered. Some people made it and some people did not. It was that simple, and any complications to that simplicity–cars, abandoned in Rialto parking lots, almost lost under a cake of aerosol expelled in the wake of everyone fleeing east from the broken city–were unwelcome.

That was not the right choice. That was not the life she wanted. That was not the person she wanted to be.

Tim Waz called, and offered her a job.

"I can't," she said. "I hurt my hand. I'm out of the game, but just for a little while. I promise. Call me for the next project, or the next. I'm on the mend. I promise."

Milton would have been proud of her, because she made Rialto in sixty minutes flat.

The car was in the outer orbits of the parking lot, where a less-than-official van rental operation had set up shop. A guy had a plywood lintel on two oil drums and said to her, when she pulled up, "Fifty dollars, five days. Fifty dollars, five days." The vans were dented and paintgone and one of them sat askew on its rear axle and you could see where it had been T-boned and someone had tried to Bondo it back into shape, but had never gotten to painting the patch.

"That's a good deal," Zelda said to the man.

"Good business," he said. Honduran? she wondered. She always wondered at the history of people. It made her feel kinship. Everyone is comprehensible.

The laser red of the car shone through only in the streaks in the tire dust that people had traced out with their hands–patterns to some higher mathematics, maybe, fine geometries across

the fenders and the quarter panel and a series of intersecting arcs over the hood. One of the windows was brushed clean but it was hard to see inside because there was some kind of haze on the inside of the glass. On the rear windscreen some kids had written, "FUCK THE POLICE" and then a big smiley face. One of the tires was flat and there were scratches around the passenger door handle where someone had tried to pry it open with a screwdriver or a kitchen knife.

"Take it," said the proprietor. "Nadie lo quiero."

"Nobody," Zelda said, and she went to the rear passenger wheel well and she pulled back the plastic fender liner in the spot a bolt was missing and pulled the key off the magnet that Milton had shown her in there, once, years ago. "If anything ever happens to me," he said, "I want you to have it. Here's where I keep the spare."

"I have a car," she had said.

"To call it a car would require more generosity than exists in my cold heart," he said. Once coming down from Big Bear her clutch had gone out and he drove them all the way back in second gear, engine roaring as they tried to keep pace with the freeway traffic hurtling down into the Basin. When they got to the bottom she took a picture of him in his cowboy hat, exhausted and grinning, with the light just right.

The door took some effort because the rubber of the windseal had gone tacky, and when she got it open, she just stared.

She noticed first that the dashboard was layered in dead moths, paperwhite and frail as gold filigree, two thousand wings fluttering from the underpressure of the opened door, tiny, dark

eyes fixed, whipcurve antennae hooded and shocking as all spirals in nature–and one was just barely alive, and it beat its wing towards the light, and it clicked and struggled.

The passenger seat was hidden under a pile of old clothes–colors and hues and clever T-shirts she might have been able to recognize, even, had they not been motheaten and stale–and the glovebox was open to reveal a tangle of blue nitrile gloves, some of which, black and inside-out and wadded up, were piled with trash in the passenger footwell. An aviation headset was on the driver's seat, the cable cut and cleanly stripped as if in preparation to resplice the connector, and then abandoned. In the back were all of his things–whatever he had left, at that point, she guessed–a big computer and a few plastic tubs filled with paintings from an ex-girlfriend and a pair of nice British cherrywood loudspeakers that had gotten him brimming with pride–"Wharfedales!" he'd said, the first time she came to his apartment, "Listen to that tone!"–and a folded wetsuit and a stained and wrinkled copy in the original Czech of *Nesnesitelná lekhost bytí* and cameras and lenses and lightmeters and lightstands and the frame to the 8x10 Mamiya of which she had always been so jealous, a long crinkle-coated telephoto he had bought before he went to Poland, the battered F5 he had never let her touch thrown carelessly into the pile and some of it spilling down over the transmission tunnel. Long, gossamer spools of film, 35mm, 120, backing blued and twisted, unfurled from heat and time, laying over it all like garlands–chemistry, if any was left, years later, weak now, and incapable of recording even the most direct of incident light.

Stuffing was coming out of the seats in long, frothed-over gashes. All the upholstery of the doors had been ripped off, and it hung in tatters, and the orange foam soundboard beneath was patchy and missing in places, and the fabric of the roof had been cut cleanly on one side as if

with a razor to remove it, and it lay folded and swaled down over the headrests and the rear deck. A twogallon of bleach was open on the passenger seat. Even after a year and a half the chlorite cut. There were a few empty bottles of hand sanitizer in the driver's well, kicked in behind the pedals.

Zelda just looked, for a long time, eyes playing over the litter like she were an archaeologist, digging through burial mounds layer by layer, sifting clay through the sieve, looking for final artifacts, for the last, little instrument still cipher to lives long vanished–the tablet that held the laws. She did not find such object. She did not and could not reduce what she saw to anything like its basics. She had known the man himself and she had known he was ill but here was a whole other mind, well beyond her capacity to figure, veiled from her, its motivations and terrors and surging desires–even he, her best friend, the one creature of all the creatures hungry and searching over the globe, that she thought she knew best, that she thought knew her best, who, for all their fighting and falling out, she had always believed to be as close as she would ever really get to kin–here entirely beyond the realm of her experience or intuition. She had brought him back a small black phurba from Daramshala, when she went– "Hang it over the door," she said, "and it will keep out demons..."–and she found it in the car, forgotten, buried in the piles of clothes and coated in the tiny amber eggs of the dead moths.

Later, on the phone with her mom, who sounded buzzy, who was worried that Jenny was doing heroin again, she would say, "It was like a wild animal had torn everything to pieces."

Zelda got the cameras out of the back and piled them in her trunk and she tried but could not lift the computer or the speakers so the van guy came over and helped her load it all into her car. "Nice things," he said.

"Yes," Zelda said. "Some nice things."

"Estás herido? Tu brazo?"

"Sí," she said.

"Tu amigo?" he said.

"Sí," she said.

"Está muerto?"

"No," she said. "Sick."

"Enfermo?"

"Sí."

"Es triste."

"Sí."

Once she got everything out she thought she could sell she checked the engine because Annika had said it was blown but she did not know how anyone would have been sure of that. She did not know engines well but the man said, "Roto. Está terminado. Está terminado. Mira la culata." Where he pointed a long oildark crack ran from one cylinder head down the side of the block. She shook hands with him–he laughed, when she cocked her left arm to offer it–and she locked the car and she hid the key back in the wheel well and she got in her car. She was learning to shift with the crook at the back of her wrist, because there are ligaments there and hers were intact and growing stronger from use. So she ascended back to the freeway, and into

the west, where, in the afternoon, the distant towers of the city in the hills shone with light she knew was no true light at all, she who knew so well all the means by which light could be altered, all the hidden spectra in even the most wan gray twilight–light could be tricked, and so light could trick–and the illusion so tempting to so many but only ever the most brilliant, backlit trace of an illusion, as in the frayed and wounded country at the base of those hills the quailing mad and in pain labored and suffered and failed, but she needed, then, to believe. So she tried.

The Movies

But earlier, in 2006, Zelda was new in town. She met Milton dayplaying as a 2nd Assistant on some low-budget short telephoned to her by an old art school friend thrice removed, but starting out requires starting at the bottom, so she took the job for no money. “They really can’t dig up even fifty bucks?” she said on the phone.

“Gotta start somewhere,” her friend said. He never got her another gig. She drove down from Los Feliz into the gray waste of the plain stretching south. It was April but the smog was already bad. On the Harbor Freeway the exit signs swam up out of the gloom like dead and bloated porpoises, surfacing in the muck. Los Angeles.

She almost gave up then and there, called it, told Chip she was was leaving him and left–back for where?–but when she got to the church Milton was halfway into the guts of an 8mm Super Speed and he had the elements scattered over the pastor’s pulpit. She stared at him for a minute.

“Hell of a sermon,” Zelda said. “If you can find a way to word it.”

“It was the only flat surface,” he said.

“You’re out of your goddamned mind,” she said.

She was not, altogether, wrong–the 8mm Super Speed was a lens rare enough that it carried a list price, at the time of its manufacture in 1978, of $12,480, unadjusted. By the ‘00s

the lens cost as much as a Mercedes and was significantly harder to blast up PCH. It was barely meant ever to be disassembled and even then only in cleanrooms otherwise superfluous before the invention of the field-effect transistor. But there he was, in some South L.A. chancel, pack of handsome German hex drivers unfurled before him like the surgeon's instruments, taking the fucker apart in the light of the clerestory blooming golden with dust. To say he made an impression on her would discount her practical side–she did, after all, care about getting paid, which was generally dependent on not being fired. He would certainly destroy the thing beyond repair and that would certainly displease his superiors and the moneymen wherever they lurked, and if he went she went–but he had a set in his jaw of wild determination.

"Zelda," she said, and when she extended her hand she thought she caught the slightest staring hesitation before he reached for it.

"Milton," he said.

"What's wrong with it?" she said, nodding to the lens.

"It won't focus far. There's a burr in the thread or something." He removed from his equipment bag–held with the left hand–a needle bastardfile that did not appear ever to have been used.

"Can you fix it?" Zelda said.

"Why not?" he said.

She was not convinced, but they had just met and so he was still capable of surprise. When he went to the bathroom (door left open, light turned off, and she just heard the sink), she wandered over to crafty to get some coffee–Zelda said, "Jesus Christ it's like drinking radiator slurry," to which the poor Production Assistant hovering nearby could only sniffle and suppress

despair at the failure of his sole responsibility, namely, making some goddamned coffee. Milton banged out of the bathroom and she heard him filing something as she choked down the sludge. Before she got back in the room he started laughing hysterically. Something in his tone had the unhinged glee of the madman tinkerer who, without knowing exactly how, has built a perpetual motion machine. Success, was one way to name it.

He didn't wear a beard yet. He was thinner than she would eventually remember him. He had a strip of fluorescent green gaffer's tape over the crotch of his jeans, which were stained black and white from bleach. She did not know yet that it was bleach but she would come to know.

"Remember how it all fits back together?" she said.

"We'll find out," he said. She watched him work over small talk, life summaries, favorite cameras ("535," Zelda said; Milton's was an Aaton 35-III, stuck-up prick). After that were ambitions and aspirations, that neither of them would honestly admit or could accurately elucidate. "I want to work for Deakins," Zelda said. "I want to shoot from airplanes," Milton said. Neither ever did.

He was too handsome to be her type and not handsome enough to be the type for girls who liked handsome boys–but she suspected he had his charms. He was too at ease for otherwise, he had that only-son-of-the-ladiesman grin, but he pricked in odd moments when people entered the room unexpectedly, and then he mapped their course through the room with the care of a portraitist. The director was a girl but he treated her like a sister but the makeup girl was also a girl and Zelda could tell something had happened, probably over alcohol, between them. She was not a diviner but she knew how to read the room; the makeup girl hung over him

like a shadow painted against the light. Later, he told her she had said to him, “I was very put off that you didn’t try to screw me, that night. I’m a very sexual person.” Zelda laughed at him and said, “Cowboy up, pard. She’s a babe and she’s got eight million other males of varying virility within a hundredmile radius. This ain’t bushleague shit.” Anyway, that was two or three weeks later.

They had to take a break and do some real work, though, when the Assistant Director came up from the basement where the lights were pinging up and said, “She’s ready.”

“Who’s ready?” Zelda said.

“The girl,” Milton said.

“What girl? What’s this movie about, anyway?”

“Oh you’re in for a real surprise on this one,” Milton said, and he stepped down from the pulpit.

In the basement, a heavy skin of dust hung in the air, gray and cancerous and roiling up from the pores of the concrete undisturbed previously for a century at least. The lights clicked and hummed as they warmed. Whatever man of God had made the mistake of lending them his church for a location had certainly been misinformed as to the precise theological nature of the film they were shooting, because down there they had the girl in her underwear and she lay on the stained sheets reading a biography of Mikhail Bulgakov. “Don’t worry,” the art department kids were saying. “It’s just coffee and milk. We did it last night.” The actress did not bat an eyelash and now the cinematographer was holding a light meter suspiciously close to her breasts and mumbling to his gaffer, “A little more, just a touch more, Nick.” It was not possible to tell if he were a lecher or an artist–the light on her breasts did have to be perfect, after all, as her

breasts were significant motivation for many of the secondary characters involved. It wasn't porn–they never shot porn, though they both got close a few times. It was something about the Polish sex trade, the director was out to save the world, the screenwriter seemed to know mostly the words, "Shut up," and "bitch," and everyone else had long since stopped paying attention.

"Oh great, another SR2," Zelda said. The camera on its dolly stood pointing into the rafters of the basement like a tragically misplaced telescope. Affixed to the side of it was a length of white gaffer's tape, on which was written, "Rocinante the Bold."

"Good enough for Tarkovsky," Milton said, taking a seat beside the camera. He seemed to be holding his breath for a long moment.

"Tarkovsky would have been using a Krasnoyarsk," Zelda said.

"I just wanted to see if you could pronounce Krasnoyarsk," Milton said.

"Are those the job qualifications these days? The skillset's slipping."

He laughed, exhaling. The actress did not look up from her book.

"You know Rocinante was kind of a shitty horse, right?" Zelda said.

"I never finished reading it," Milton said. "Alan says you just came down from San Francisco?"

"I did."

"By yourself?"

"With a boy."

"Uh oh," Milton said.

"You're telling me."

"Are you from San Francisco San Francisco?"

"I'm from Seattle," Zelda said.

"Seattle Seattle?"

"What are you some kind of fucking cartographer? I'm from Kent."

"Been through there a few times," Milton said.

"Let's get to work," Zelda said.

"No sticks on this one," Milton said to Zelda, who was writing out the slate.

"Mit out sound!" the sound mixer said, laughing as went up the stairs. His boom operator was lingering as long as he could, mic pole limp over his shoulder as he morosely eyed the girl in her underwear like she were the last pear in the pail. "Mit out sound!" rang from upstairs again.

"What's wrong with the mixer?" Zelda said as the actress stirred and readied.

"Success has gone straight to his head," Milton said. "We've finally made it, you know? Look at this place." He spread his arms, offering a bounty of the derelict and certainly poisonous basement, gritty to a double-t. Gritty was key, in their industry. Gritty was the one thing consistently achieved in all those short shorts, sixty-minute features, bad music videos they worked on, back then. A few weeks later they'd be shooting–true story–some punk band smashing televisions in a parking lot, but they didn't really get to choose what to point the camera at. The televisions were old tube sets from the '50s. They were smashing them with baseball bats.

"This must be the glamour side of Hollywood," Zelda said. "I've heard so much about it."

"Success, success, success," Milton said, laughing until the camera clicked up.

“What’s up with the 8mm?” the cinematographer asked.

“I can fix it,” Milton said.

“We need it for the next shot. We’ve shot everything else we can.” In the basement the grips were sleeping in the corners and the actress could not read her Bulgakov anymore because the art girls were finishing up tying her to the bed. The makeup girl sat beside her featureless and still as the queen’s attendant.

“After this one I’ll head upstairs and put it back together,” Milton said.

“Put what back together?”

“The lens.”

“You took it apart?” the cinematographer asked.

“Well, you have to, to fix it...”

The cinematographer stared at him for a minute. “Nick, wake everybody up. You gotta go upstairs now.” The gaffer went from corner to corner kicking his minions.

Milton racked the focus from stop to stop, the inscriptions on the lens whirling, and he waited as the assistant director shooed the rest of them out and up the stairs. A stop was what they called the logarithmic denominations of the variable aperture of the lens, which corresponded to how bright the scene was. The stairs were proof you were superfluous. Even the cinematographer left, then, because the shot was static and the lights were set. The director stayed because she was, unusually, a woman. She still had her Estonian accent and was just short of brilliant but after that she disappeared and he never heard of her again. Milton told Zelda drunk later that he would have followed her into the jaws of rather more ravenous hells

than South Adams church cellars, but that wordless vanishing always seemed to happen with the smart ones. Nobody knew where they went.

Milton was a 1st Assistant Cameraman. Milton was the only boy allowed to stay in the basement, then–his job could not be relegated up the stairs or finished beforehand. His job could not be accomplished by someone else because it required a skill no one else in the basement had. To be fair, he was hardly a unique or master craftsman–his was a skill possessed by no fair few assistant cameramen and about twelve assistant camerawomen, in that city, then–but he was one of the few dumb enough to work on student films, for seventy-five a day.

His job was to keep the girl in focus.

She would move little but just enough–turning her head from to side, and he would be there, with his lens and his little wheel, to follow exactly the distance to the pinlight in her eye, guessing because focus could not be seen or anticipated through the dim viewfinder of the film camera, and so he was something like a last seer, another eye, even, for the camera–staring at the girl in every rehearsal to memorize her movements and as if to divine something like her spirit, to be able to predict which way she would turn her head, when she would bite her lip and throw her neck back, when she would struggle against the straps. It would be too much to say that he felt whatever she did–he certainly did not prepare, as she did, by imagining his hymen was about to be forcibly broken by an altogether blunt instrument–but if she was an actress then he was an augur, trying to read her. Trying to predict futures–hers and otherwise.

His job was to make sure everything was in focus.

And so Milton remained fixed to the left side of the camera even as the director asked the actress if she was okay, and the actress was okay, so the art girls took off her bra and tightened

up the leather straps and the actress found some real dark depths to tap because in the editing room the sound guy would be adding a heavy, muffled breath coming down the stairs to take from the girl the last thing she had to call her own.

A few weeks later, with the film finished, Milton and the actress would be at the Bourgeois Pig arguing over cheap-champagne headaches the proximate causes of the Eastern European sex trade–and attempting to convince each other of respective viewpoints by subsequently having sex–but there, in the basement, such causes were largely ignored. Psychosociosexual subtleties are difficult to master in a seventeen-minute short film the budget for which had come almost entirely from the generosity of the boom guy's grandmother.

But in the basement, the script had been written (just on the ragged edge of exploitative, but *trying*, at least), the crew had been assembled, the girl was dressed for the part and she could cry on command, and the camera was massive as a star holding everything else in orbit. "No sticks, remember," Milton said to Zelda. She nodded and offered to run out his tapemeasure one more time–the girl's eyes would flash in precise focus–and he placed his hand on the camera.

"Is Rocinante the Bold prepared?" the director said.

"Camera's set."

"Roll camera," she said.

"Speed," Milton said, as the film chattered through the machine. He held his breath. Zelda blazed the slate with her flashlight in front of the lens, and ducked away. The girl did not move.

"Action."

"What the fuck, Milton," the cinematographer said. He was standing by the pulpit and had a piece of the lens in his hand.

"I'm fixing it."

"Do you know how much our fucking deposit is? If you can't get this back together we're boned."

"How much is the deposit?" Zelda said.

"Sixteen grand."

"Sixteen grand on the deposit and you can't spare me a fifty?" She was grinning.

"Who are you exactly?" the cinematographer said. He was turning the piece over in his hands–an optical tube, black, aluminum, threaded like everything else in the lens, precise as a pistol.

"Milton's new 2nd. You're getting oil from your fingers all over that tube."

"You're getting on my nerves."

"You get what you pay for."

The cinematographer left, saying, "We're waiting on you, Milton," and he pinged the optical tube into the corner in a rage. Milton stared at it for a moment, tracing quickly the moulding along the floor for something unseen, then stood at the podium to survey the smattering of parts and optical glass he'd left in disarray.

"My new 2nd, huh? Guess that makes it official," Milton said.

"Am I coming on too strong?" Zelda said.

"You're one of those people who just can never keep their mouth shut, aren't you?"

"Yes," Zelda said. "But I'm pretty good at my job. Do you have any more work coming up?"

"Next week's pickups for a Tyke Myson movie."

"Tyke...is that the dwarf boxer?"

"With a heart of gold. Abraham's a good guy. Hilarious."

"Interested?"

"Is that a joke? Of course I'm interested. How do the little people pay these days?"

"Hundred seventy-five a day."

"For a 2nd?"

"Little guy draws a crowd, I guess. Let's see if I can't conjure a miracle," he said, and he leaned over the pedestal. For the most part, he seemed, actually, to know what he was doing, but when he asked her to get the optical tube from the corner he held it strangely, set it aside in the corner with two fingers he did not then seem to use for anything else, so when he screwed pieces back together he held them with the back of his wrist like an invalid.

"Do you want me to wash it off?" Zelda said. He almost startled, and then she said, "It's got to be cleaned anyway."

"I've got turpentine in my bag," he said. She ran the tube under the sink and when she was finishing he stood at the door watching and said, "Turn it off with your elbow, please," so she did. She dried the piece and scrubbed it with solvent and dried it again with optical tissue and set it on the podium.

"Thanks," he said.

"It's my job," she said. "Now the hard part."

Of course, once he got the thing back together–with her at his shoulder barely breathing, hefting tiny knife-edge picks and curvejaw tweezers and a stainless tenaculum he could only have gotten from a medical supply warehouse, layering the wings of the lens aperture back together with the delicacy and detail of an ancient fishscale necklace, snap rings to hold the sparkling glass, fine new-filed threads on the focusing helicoid sliding in smooth as a skiff in still water–the lens was useless.

"What?" the cinematographer said. "You said you fixed it."

"I did," Milton said. "We just can't use it."

"Milton, we just sat around waiting for you for two hours because you said you could fix it..."

"I did, look, see how smooth the focus is?"

"If we can't use it how is it fixed?"

The cinematographer was young, self-made, aiming for the top of the ladder and so one of the insufferable ones who would succeed against all the odds. Even though he was paying his 1st only $75 a day and, quote Zelda, "You get what you pay for," he was not pleased with this slip in the schedule. He almost fired him right then and there, but then Zelda pulled him aside.

"I'm Zelda," she said.

"I know who you are. You should find somebody else to work for."

"I'm new in town," she said.

"Last time he took apart a BL4 on a goddamn schoolteacher's desk. We lost the light."

"What was wrong with it?"

"Shutter was out of phase. He said he fixed that, too."

"I did fix it," Milton said from the other room.

"Milton, god damn it–"

"He did fix the lens, though, see...it just needs to be collimated, after you take it apart, you know, like calibrated. We don't have the machine to do that. They cost thousands of dollars. So it's just not calibrated."

"Can I use it for the shot?"

"Well, no," said Zelda. "But he did fix it."

"If you can't calibrate it here why did he have us wait for him? We lose this church tomorrow night. We've got six shots left tonight and twenty-seven tomorrow."

"Twenty-seven?" Zelda said. "Guess we better get back to work."

"Without the lens we need?"

"Well, we've got a 10mm, no? That's close enough."

"I say what's close enough."

"And I say what we've got. Which is a 10mm. Shall we?"

The cinematographer growled, vanished into the basement, where the electrics had killed all their lights and were sleeping down there in the dark with bandanas over their faces like stored statuary. "We're back up," the cinematographer shouted, and from the basement the sound of all the lights striking up.

"Get us ready for the next shot," Milton said to Zelda, with his tools and the object itself arranged on the pulpit. "I'll be down in two more minutes." She was not given to fits of easy wonder, but then, she was always one to be seduced by the light–if she were not she would not be where she was, then. So she took a moment before turning for the stairs and she would

always remember her friend like that, biting his lip in concentration, screwing some final casing or nameplate down onto the instrument, afternoon lowering into the nave behind him. Neither believed in things holy but that was as close as she ever got to seeing him in his perfect moment.

On lunch Zelda spent fifteen minutes on the phone and, in moments when the ambient traffic roar faltered, argument drifted. "What's she yelling about?" the actress asked him as she sunbathed on the roof of his car.

"Indeterminate," he said.

When she hung up and got her food she came over and said, "I came not to send peace but a hot dog." The actress stared at her.

Twenty minutes later the actress was bloody and carbon-covered, cowering in a corner as the friendly older girl came with a sponge to clean her up. "Cut," the director said. "Manushka, remember, you need to hold it from the other side, we can't see it."

"Sorry," Manushka said.

Zelda hit her stride after about two steps in. She was good, especially for someone so young. She was, incidentally, two years older than him, but he was not immune to the chauvinism of his industry, and so a twenty-three year old woman was considered perhaps six months less experienced than a twenty-one year old boy. Zelda was young, then, but she was good. He did not have to remind her to latch the left butterfly of the lens case ("One latch means the case is working, don't move it," he'd had to tell the interning sociological phenomenologist that Zelda replaced, who had stared at the rugged crashproof case like she were trying to figure the causative factors latent in its childhood.) He did not have to tell Zelda to hand him the lenses

element-out (she didn't yet know to set the focus first to infinity, but he didn't know, then, that that was expected). He did not have to tell her much of anything except what the hell the film was about, when she whispered in his ear, "What the hell is this film about?"

"She's in Eastern Europe and she's been sold to some guys who are gonna sell her to some Germans," Milton said.

"East Germans?" Zelda said.

"Just Germans, I think."

"And they're gonna give her a decent well-paying job and make sure she has good Dental?"

"Something like that," Milton said.

"Cheery picture," Zelda said. "From now on don't call me unless it's for a toilet paper commercial or something."

"Do we have any crosses?" one of the art department girls said.

"Why do you want a cross?" another said.

"Symbolism."

"It's a church. Gotta be some around here somewhere." She went upstairs to hunt for relics.

"What was that in the parking lot?" Milton said.

"Love is grand," Zelda said.

"What's his name?"

"Chip," she said.

"Is that a joke?" Milton said.

"More tragic than that, unfortunately. He wants to act. He's got a kid back in San Francisco."

"Not yours?"

"Not mine," she said. "I'm selfish, but not that fucking selfish."

"Picture's up," the AD said. Zelda took the slate from her belt–Scene Sixteen Able, Take One–and she said, "MOS?"

"Mit out sound!" the mixer shouted, laughing raggedly. "Mit out sound!"

"Is he on drugs?" somebody said.

When they rolled Zelda had her fingers clasped between the jaws of the clapper, signal to the editors that the take would have no associated audio track coming from the sound department, and when Milton flicked the switch Rocinante struggled up to speed, a low pulsing scratch from the magazine where the edge of the film rasped against something, and so Milton took it in both hands, slapped it hard, once, and said, "Speed," as the camera quieted and the girl blinked one last time. Some German brute loomed in the foreground, oozing with violence.

"Action," the director said, and in the basement, the little play at the broken world began, the girl cowered, the monster edged forward with malice, and upstairs the rest of the crew lounged and laughed and the art girls debated which bronze cross was more appropriate to the ethnocultural specificities of what they called, incorrectly, Czechoslovakia–that film crew, inhabiting that church now of denomination entirely unnamed, some few dozen young storytellers, truthseekers, vision-questing fools and dreamers and Milton and Zelda, at work in the dark razored open by the hissing arclights, even the towering man playing the brute with the terrified girl by the neck and blood all over the sheets–the blood was fake blood, the sheets were

new sheets–all forgot for a moment out beyond the basement the actuality of what it was they were even now transcribing.

There are stories and some of them are true and wasn't that the point, when the sun went down, when the projector flickered up? Show something to someone. Move them. Wake them. Stagger them dumb with some vision or other. But none of them put it to ourselves in that way except in the drunken stumble of Saturday-night dreams they would never remember–and so they never seemed to remember it, when they were at work, and sober. The relationship never resolved. Whatever connection between the two worlds was sublime as ethanol and cast no shadow.

"Do you think this kind of shit really happens?" we asked each other. "Even in the States?" Others nodded.

"Sure. Didn't you read the script?"

"Even in the States?"

"In L.A., even. In L.A." They had heard stories. They had heard whispers, of what happened out there in the dark.

Day two, Milton ran into Zelda in the street outside his apartment, as he walked to his car.

"What are you doing here?"

"I live here," Zelda said.

"I live here," Milton said.

They lived right across from each other, between the Hollywood and Franklin block of Kingsley, the murky triumvirate borders of the Armenians to the northwest and the hipsters to the

northeast and the silent, stern Thai waitress ghettoes yawning south to De Longpre where it went Salvadorean. A few months later they'd be sitting in the sunset watching the toughs play cricket in the street, and when Zelda demanded one of them explain the rules he told her it wasn't appropriate for women to talk to him like that and Zelda had to hold her back from throwing punches. Once Milton dated an Armenian girl from Glendale and her brother kept winding up in jail. He tried to play the role model but the kid never even cared to learn his name, which was probably fair, because what kind of a role model made fourteen grand a year and left nice Armenian girls screaming on oxycodone into the night about how different she was now? Years later she was living in New York and had gotten pretty bad into drugs because her father died, but she told me she was doing alright and was finishing up a documentary. The brother was not discussed.

"Guess we should carpool?" Zelda said.

"Let's hit a hardware store. I want to get some respirators for people to wear in the basement."

On the way down her stereo was saying, "And we don't want to die or apologize," and he was clutching the dry cleaning handle like it would save him from the eighteen-wheelers she was so intent on slaloming down the Hollywood Freeway until she fired them off onto Exposition. The university and the museums passed clean and gorgeous but everything past Vermont looked like another city entirely–their L.A. was not Florence and Normandie L.A., to be sure. Years later they did shoot in Watts–on the sole soundstage in Watts, a kids' movie starring the certified largest dog in the world. It was a pretty big dog. They talked about how he came up to their chins that night, back up in Los Feliz, Silver Lake, Echo Park, wherever.

The church seemed smaller than the day before. The AD was shooing some homeless guys away from the awning.

"No services today," he was saying. "We're shooting a movie. No services."

"What's the movie about?" they said.

"It's a mayonnaise commercial," Zelda said, stepping from the car.

"Aw man I wanted to see some movie stars," a homeless guy said, and then disappeared.

They got to work. Before descending into the basement Milton took the 50-pack of respirator facemasks he'd got and slipped one over his forehead.

"What's that for?" the director asked.

"It's probably bad for us, breathing down there," Milton said, and he offered her a mask. She did not take it.

No one took them, in fact, when Milton offered, and so he sat there hunched over the camera dolly with the respirator hiding his face, the noseband folded tight. He barely moved, and when, after one shot, Milton readjusted the mask, Tim Waz from a corner where he stood said, "Don't be such a fucking pussy, dude." Milton had no retort and seemed not to want to touch anything but the camera.

Zelda took a mask from the pack, and slipped it over her head. "It's fucking gross down here," she said. "I coughed up two pounds of shit last night."

They shot through into afternoon, Zelda and Milton alone visible in the dark where the white respirators bloomed and caught the light, and the girl now chained to the wall, blood–fake blood–down her arms and hands from where she had tried to kill herself. The shackles had a quick release so that whenever they cut she could let herself down, and so she alternated from the

prisoner's posture to a pose of leisure, lounging on the bed, reading a biography of Maxim Gorky. She seemed to slip in and out of either experience with the easy grace of the girl to whom it has never occurred that some things are impossible. Neither self left a residue on the other, so she alternated between two worlds, the insane world, where young women were sold for pennies for something so common as their sex, and the gorgeous world, where young women were sold for thousands if not millions of dollars, for something so common as the merely R-rated suggestion of their sex. Where was the interface? Which was the real world, and which the imagined one? We were never sure.

Few could yet give name or shape to that burgeoning surety that we were pointing the camera at all the wrong things. Milton and Zelda, though, came close, eventually. Years later. What else was it, in the light, forever just out of sight? Not truth, exactly–"We're not stupid enough to believe in truth," Zelda would tell him, when she got back from Daramshala. Whatever that meant.

"Rollout," Milton said into his mask, as the film magazine clattered and emptied.

"What?" somebody said.

"Rollout," Zelda said, louder.

"Alright, let's take five everybody," the director said. "Zsusza, why don't you go get some air? Where is her bra? She needs a break." They all shuffled upstairs, blinking in the sun. The sound guy did a backflip off the rental van. "Is he on drugs?" somebody said again. "Mit out sound!" He laughed and laughed.

Out in the L.A. Basin, whatever strange atmospheres and bleary smogs of truth it were that made the city such a diffuse beacon for the lost, though ebbing by season like the long cycle

of drought and flood, never ran out–and so the city never exhausted its stockpile of eccentrics, the overly ebullient, the raucously joyous and the tumbling fallen. Every film crew was lush with examples of each, clamoring at the edge of madness, but they were only ever just one end of a darkening spectrum. There was Milton, to be sure, already sick, soon to be sicker. But from that gloomy church basement a thrown stone could easily strike at least fourteen people who were still drunk on the dream–as the sound mixer was, reckless with ecstatic energy, incapable of constraining it, but hurtling for an edge of some sort; he was not on drugs, yet, but two and half years later he would, on a fast Japanese motorcycle, exceed his energy budget and go hurtling off the Angeles Crest Highway into the darkness.

Milton and Zelda stood side by side, shading their eyes. She picked up a rock, and she said, “Do you like music? There’s a show at The Glasshouse tonight.” She winged the stone into the west. There was no breeze. The vapors of the city hung and turned.

“Picture’s up,” the AD said. They went back down to the basement, and the dark, and the camera, and finished out the day.

Los Angeles and the American Dream

Los Angeles was best running away from it so he ran out of gas somewhere in South Dakota in the snow.

A stranger ran out from the truck stop and helped him push his car to the pump. "Where you headed?" the man asked when he caught his breath against the trunk.

"East," Milton said.

"Hell, boy," the man said. "Get there quick."

On the side of the freeway in West Virginia he was taking pictures of a sooted gasfield on the left bank of the Ohio. The state trooper told him it was a pretty bad idea to be so far from California on expired tags and he gave him the ticket. "Get over onto US-60, you want to see what you came to see," the trooper said, and twenty miles on Milton spent an hour figuring how to get to the crest overlooking the abandoned coalworks where the world split like a lesion. From up there with all the rust and the alien cobalt sheen leaching out into the river he thought he could see something to prove anything. The shutter clicked and clicked until he was out of film, and he got back in the car.

In Pennsylvania the night was just curtaining up from the horizon. The storms were breaking. He'd been awake for twenty, twenty-two hours, wasn't ready yet to stop driving. He stood on the hill by the chainlink covered in flags–"93," one was marked, in a field of stars–and

he looked down to where the plane had crashed. All that was left was a blue swale rimed in frost and subliming to fog with the first light.

In Newport News he was taking pictures of the keel of the aircraft carrier laid out in the drydock when a guy in a wheelchair said, “Man they’ll shoot your ass you takin’ pictures like that.” He flashed a peace sign and laughed and laughed. He said he used to build ships until he lost his legs. They talked about America for a little while until the cops shooed Milton back into the miles.

Of course, it pays to start at the beginning, and so he started a couple months earlier, in the parking lot of Central Auto Sound on Alameda.

That was Glendale and the least interesting part, so Milton was not hesitant to get on the road. What he paid to start was somewhere near $650, which was a deal. The speakers were good enough and German and he’d find a way to replace the wobbling shift knob in Salt Lake. He was gonna stay on the road after the movie. He was gonna go see Elizabeth in Louisville. He figured he was ten weeks from getting back to California. He was heady with the prospect of velocity.

Yemane had not been impressed when he told him he wouldn’t be showing up to the cutting room anymore. “I have every confidence you will be a great cinematographer someday, Milton,” he’d said on the phone. “But you made a commitment. At least give me time to find another editor.”

“We start shooting tomorrow,” Milton lied–they started shooting in three days. “I’ve got to get up to Salt Lake for the camera prep.” Milton was lying again–Zelda was already in Salt

Lake, flown up to check over and assemble their array of equipment. “What about Yoni? I know for sure he’s not working right now.”

“I mean this as a friend and a mentor,” Yemane said. “But someday, Milton, people are going to notice that you never finish anything.”

From the stereo shop he could see the freeways vining the hills. Traffic looked light. The San Gabriels were white with the winter’s last dusting, but the storm had been small. The roads up into the desert would be passable with good tires and now he had good tires.

Yemane had been paying him ten bucks an hour. The paycheck from last fall’s feature had finally cleared. His grandmother had died and when they were settling her estate they’d found money squirreled away in phantom bank accounts all over Western Europe. She must have been crazy. He had about eighteen thousand dollars–he was flush with cash enough at least to quiet, in the mind of the young reckless, any worries but getting in the damn car and getting out of L.A. CA-2 murmured and promised in the haze heading north.

Zelda had taken a little more convincing to get out to Salt Lake–her agreeing to do the movie for expenses only could probably be rendered down ultimately to her getting away from Chip for a little while. “How much are they paying *you?*” she asked on the phone while he watched the guys string up the preamp.

“Fifty a day.”

“Plus expenses?”

“Just gas and a couch. I’m on my own for beer.”

“Well well,” Zelda said. “They promised to comp me a few bar tabs. And they say chivalry’s dead....”

"Yeah but they water down the beer out there."

"What?"

"To three percent. Mormons."

"What fucking wasteland have you dragged me off to, Milton?"

"We are seekers in service of higher ideals," he said.

"Fuck off," she said.

"Is that a 100?" the tech asked as he was settling up, nodding to the car.

"90."

"'95?"

"'94."

"I like the red."

"It's not bad," Milton said.

Zelda called him again from the camera house as he wrangled himself into the Northbound lane, because what other direction would anyone go? He'd been just about to try out the speakers.

"They're trying to give us a BL2," Zelda said.

"What?"

"I told them! Seriously, Milton, this thing looks like it was in the trenches with the Third Reich."

"Trenches would have been the Second Reich," he said.

"You're obnoxious," she said.

“What about a blimp?” he said. A blimp was a foam jacket that slipped over older motion picture cameras–that were, generally, louder than the artillery employed by your choice of any of the Reichs–to make it just barely quiet enough that recorded sound might be useful. In old movies you can sometimes hear the ticking of the camera despite the blimp; they did not work particularly well. “See if you can get a blimp.”

“You mean a zeppelin,” she said. A zeppelin was a type of blimp.

“See you soon sunshine.”

Sunshine was what he crossed as far as Bishop until a storm cammed out from over the Sierras. The dark gathered and he could not tell if it was the rain or the world turning and then he crossed Nevada under a moon that faltered and rayed down through the breaking storm until there was only the far blue waste in the dark, that he crossed, fast, because it was a fast car until he crashed it–but he didn’t crash the car that night or the next which was as far as he was thinking and, anyway, as far as mattered, those days.

In Salt Lake he slept on the producer’s couch until the fourth night, when Milton started sleeping in the camera intern’s bed. He liked Salt Lake; it seemed freer of suffering than L.A., at least, and the punks there had everything dialed up to 14, on account of Mormons. He’d never seen mohawks taller, brighter, egged more permanent–they stood like monuments in the night where the punks waited for the crosswalk signal.

Annika, the camera intern, had just come home from Boston with a Masters in linguistics. Her dad had dereformed back to Mormon but she’d grown up in L.A., her mom was still there, in Altadena. Annika’s mother was, in fact and revealed after four beers at two and half ABV, with a

late-winter storm whiting the rise east to the Wasatch, a rocket scientist. Milton was attempting an air of casual disbelief that did not preclude his teary-eyed staring.

"When you say she's a rocket scientist," Milton said, "you mean she designs the switch for the vacuum cleaner they use in the astronaut lounge, or something."

"She's program manager on Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter," Annika said.

Milton's jaw must have dropped because Zelda said, "Fire those retrorockets, hot shot," and slapped him in the back of the head.

"They're having some problems with the spacecraft right now, actually," Annika said.

"I was just reading about that," he mumbled.

"Does that line work on all the boys?" Zelda said.

"Eighty out of a hundred, I'd say," Annika said.

"And here I spend so much time on my hair."

"I miss L.A.," Annika said. "There's few like *you* here, Zelda."

"I'll take that as a compliment. So, Annika, is it cosmic circumstance or prickly rebellion that makes the daughter of a rocket scientist drop the family business and wind up recharging batteries on low-budget zombie movies? No offense."

"None taken. I'm as disappointed as they are."

Annika's father was quiet and did not seem often to match Milton's eyeline. He was kind, and on afternoons when the film wrapped early, Annika would go out to the greenhouse with him, he was delicate and precise where he lifted the frost tents to pull early carrots and snap beans. Milton watched through the window in the warmth. Annika's father seemed always to be in the kitchen, slicing vegetables. Her bedroom was detached, it used to be the father's

workshop but he didn't work on anything anymore. Annika came and went as she pleased, she was twenty-five, Milton hoped their sex did not carry to her father in the house, there was something wounded to the man that he didn't ask after until years later, when he saw him again, in L.A.–Annika's doctoral graduation, something like that, her father remembered him, shook his hand, watched quietly after his ex-wife, smiled. Anyway, that was later.

At breakfast, he asked after time in The Movies–greatest adventure, biggest star seen, all of that. Most of the stories he told involved Zelda, either in foreground or backlit in periphery. "Is he exaggerating?" Annikka's father asked.

"Not really," she said. "Zelda's much more fun than he is. Time to get to work!"

Her father lived at the almost-respectable edges of Sugar House where the elevation was just starting to curl. Most nights after they wrapped someone or other would be hosting a basement party, and they'd creak down into the dungeon where hoppers brimmed with homebrews at eight percent alcohol–"This is what happens when they water down the beer," Zelda said, well into mastering her second eagle-handled flagon–it was the last edge of winter and the lights were still strung, Zelda had somehow wound up in a staggeringly vast romance with a local librarian and so the four of them leaned against fences, took turns riding the librarian's motorcycle in circles in the street, on off nights he snuck them up to the roof of the main branch and they shivered and huddled all four of them in the cold with the city and the mountains in the starlight beyond.

"It's beautiful here," Zelda said.

Zelda's librarian had a tattoo on his wrist that said "DON'T QUIT," which made Milton laugh hysterically when he saw it up on the roof. "You're a fucking prick," she said, but her librarian was laughing too.

"Don't ever take off your reading glasses, I guess," Milton said.

"Might want to switch to contacts," Zelda said, after a long minute. Everyone was laughing now. Milton crossed after Annika, let the world wheel a bit before he kissed her, "The doors will lock after you," the librarian said, and they yammered against the cold and watched the motorcycle angle into the dark from the roof.

"How many girlfriends have you had?" she said.

"Girlfriends?"

"Sure."

"I don't know. Zelda says I'm a serial monogamist."

"Well. Worse forms of compulsive behavior, I guess."

"Seven or eight I guess."

"What's the longest?"

"Four, five months."

"Your call?"

"Well. I always think of myself as the underdog who gets dumped, but."

She laughed. "You're far too handsome for that to be true. You must be meaner than you think."

"I guess so," he said.

"You and Zelda?" she said.

“Just friends,” he said. “She lives with someone.”

“Well,” Annika said. “That won’t last long.”

“Her living with someone?”

“Just friends. You’ll see.”

“What are you, jea–”

“No, I’m not jealous. In a few weeks you guys will be gone.”

“And you?”

“I like dreamer types like you,” she said. “But not forever. Maybe, after you leave and this is over, you could call me every six months, for the rest of your life, just to tell me how you’re doing?”

They stayed for a while before they went home, mountains moonlit, snowstorm threatening in where it left a swale of white out over the desert in its approach. They were too tired for sex so they just slept a few hours before the 6 a.m. call for the day’s dawn-to-dusk.

The Salt Lake movie was something about zombies. On any given year, 40-60% of everything they shot was something about zombies (indeed, many of them would later go on to spend one long and particularly lecherous summer in Las Vegas shooting out the principal photography for *Zombie Strippers from Hell*, but Milton and Zelda both missed that crew call, unfortunately). The directors were LDS, and presumably keeping the thematic specifics of their movie hidden from their local ward. There were no strippers, but there were many buxom young starlets shipped up from California to strip down to bras before being brained. They shot in the clean, sparkling alleyways of Salt Lake’s downtown, abandoned in the night to no one but the film

crew, and so for those of them in from L.A. it was eerie, it leant an edge of malice, even–where were the ambulances pistoning the derelict avenues, roostertail of trash after them? Where were the homeless urinating on their camera cases from fire escapes or mumbling about the dayplaying they had done, once? Where was the boil of the city? There was something nefarious in Salt Lake City's order, in its innoculation against decay. "It's people!" Zelda kept saying. "It's made of people!"

When they shot in daylight the grips were working overtime with the scrims, the cinematographer was going for a kind of reverse day-for-night so that everything looked silver and spooky. They spent a couple days taking up a whole half of the Blue Plate. Not just the plates–the walls that old leadpaint blue nobody could get anymore, and the gaffer threw some R80 over the arclights he blasted in through the window, blue so blue it vibrated purple, so the place seeped tragedy past or impending. The hero–Ron Howard haircut, shortstop star so of course he always had his bat handy for when the freaks came marauding–did not seem to understand the difference between a take and a rehearsal. "That was a really good one, no? One for my reel?"

"Sure buddy," the directors said, patting him on the back, ducking him into his trailer. "Let's let them finish up the lighting, alright?"

"If they cut the trailer maybe we could get real day rates," Zelda said.

"If we got real day rates," Milton said, "they would've hired people who work for real day rates, and we'd be back in L.A."

The Arriflex BL2 35mm motion picture camera was loud as a mountain howitzer and the blimp Zelda'd begged from the camera rental house had lost so much of its stuffing over the

years that it hung limply from the magazine like a helium balloon a week after the party. Eventually they just left it in the case. But the BL2 had its merits–namely, it was as indestructible as an anvil, finished in that old handsome lacquer crinkle-coat that was even now just starting to weather away, after seventy years on the shoulder. The drive belt was loose so that it slipped out of phase every so often, but Milton was still stupid enough to think it within his capabilities to fix. There were stories passed around among the Old Salt, about BL2s getting creamed by stunt cars at a hundred miles an hour, tumbling hale from helicopter crashes, being driven over by tanks. That they were West German was perhaps evidence of the latter example. For their part, Zelda and Milton never abused but did occassionally misuse their BL2, tended it less preciously from the DP's madman attempts to find the angle–"Sure, we can hang it off the roof on the Rube Goldberg nightmare device the grips have rigged for us" or "Yes, feel free to mount the camera to the trunk of the exploding automobile."

This was all back when digital cameras still looked like shit–the *Star Wars I-III* look, surface detail moiring enough to yield statistical spikes in epilepsy among viewers, closeups like wax masks through a gauze of old garbage bags–so everyone but Lucas still shot on film. Motion picture film doesn't come in casettes or cartridges like still camera film, but in big rolls like duct tape, sometimes 2000' long. Just like still camera film, you keep it in the refrigerator. Those days if you wanted to know if a cinematographer was legit you asked to see his fridge. If it was full of old short ends from half-finished movies and projects that had imploded, then he was legit. If it was full of groceries he was not legit.

At the start of the shooting day, the camera loader–or, on low-budget films, the 2nd AC, or, on *very* low budget films, the camera intern–loads a complement of magazines with film. On

pictures of movie sets, the magazine is the big oval shape attached to the top of the camera. If the magazine is covered in colored tape, the picture is from a real movie set–if the magazine has no tape on it, the picture is staged, because the loader wraps each film magazine with a given color of tape so that the 1st AC knows what kind of film is loaded. The best loaders and 2nd ACs have in their toolbags such a spectrum of colored gaffer's tapes to blush even Monet's palette. Gaffer's tape is cloth tape. Duct tape is sacrilege.

BL mags were impossible to load even in a darkroom and Annika had only Milton's collapsible light-proof changing tent. The camera truck they got in Salt Lake was not a camera truck but the producer's minivan. Half her mags were too tense but he said nothing. Zelda checked them wordlessly after Annika brought them out from the van. When Annika went back to the van Zelda said, "So just because she's cute she doesn't have to load the mags right?"

"You're free to tell her," Milton said.

"Fuck you," she said.

"I want to move home to L.A. in the fall," Annika said.

"No you don't," he said.

"It's there or New York and I hate New York."

"I hate L.A.," Milton said.

"I liked Boston," she said.

"Move to Boston, then."

"There's no work in Boston."

"Sure there is. Just not for cameragirls."

"I don't want to be a cameragirl. I want to do costumes, or art department. I'm not sure. I want to make things. Who makes things? Producers? Do they make things? Or do they just make money?"

"Producers," Milton said, "spend money."

"How gauche. Maybe I'll just say fuck it and go back to being a linguist."

"So why, exactly, are you interning on this nightmare low-budget freakshow?"

"Fun, I guess. I do like the language. 'Diffraction.' 'Spherical aberration.' 'Coma.'"

"Those are all bad things."

"Well, they're named well. Anyway. They have linguists in L.A."

"Bad ones."

"You're not very encouraging," she said.

"Sorry," he said. "It's a great city."

"Why do you stay? You sound miserable."

"Nah. Wait until we get the crane. The crane makes it worth it."

"Zelda said they don't use cranes much anymore."

"Nah. It's all remote heads now."

"So?"

"Well. Less and less worth it, then?"

"Sometimes I worry I can't *see* L.A., you know? Growing up there, you get so used to its excesses and exigencies. What's it *like?*"

"It has its moments," he said.

"Name one."

He thought for a while. He was playing with her bra. She was playing with the windowshade. He was trying for the air of the older man, world-weary, in bed with the ingenue, but she wasn't buying it, which was fair–she was twenty-five and he was twenty-one.

"There's this one underpass where a truck crashed in the '50s or '60s I guess. It was full of chickens. Have you heard about this? In the Valley?"

"No. Full of chickens?"

"Like, it was hauling chickens."

"Live chickens?"

"Yeah...yes, live chickens."

"Okay."

"Anyway a bunch got loose in the crash. Nobody could catch them all so they started a little colony. They're still down there, a few thousand of them. There's a big mural on the side of the freeway with a bunch of chickens painted on it. Like, yup, that's a painting of the chickens right there. It's pretty great."

"Where?"

"It's in the Valley."

"That's it?"

"Well," he said.

"That's pretty fucking pathetic," Annika said. "Aren't you supposed to be able to *see* things? Come on. *Name* something. Impress me, dreamer, or I'll find somehow else who will."

"Well," he said. "I've got half my pilot's license."

"Which half? Takeoff or landing? That seems pretty important."

"Funny," he said. "Anyway. I've been up a few times."

"So?"

"Sometimes the view is pretty."

From the Piper, the geography of the thing was closest to comprehensible. The instructor had his hand on the oh-shit and Milton had the controls. The aircraft rolled into the bank quicker than he would have thought. "Back pressure to keep up the altitude," the instructor said. "Add power." The city spilled from the window. They just up there turning in circles, for a long time, watching the horizon wheel.

Zelda had gotten him the first three lessons for his twenty-first. A Private Pilot's license took 50, but he went up again whenever he had the money. Sometimes he went up instead of paying his rent, and borrowed money from Zelda until the next gig.

Rolling through the headings, the freeways radiated in cardinals and through the hills and ranges and the wide gray flats of the basins–the 210, west, into Pasadena, was right for the sun, so the windshields glittered and flashed. "Turn a little wider to the north the next turn," the instructor said. "It's Class C over the interchange, we don't want to get run over by a 747. See all the jets on approach for LAX?" To the south in the sky twin parallels of sunflares crossed for the coast, lowering into the smog. He let up the wing a little. The San Gabriels swung out ahead of them and the range cities laboring out in staggered array, Asuza, Glendora, San Dimas where a couple years later he'd be filming in a back yard and Nick Smith would keep saying, "San Dimas High School Football rules!" while eating all the broccoli off the craft services table. Rialto was out there in the murk beyond, but he didn't know that yet.

By now he'd been in L.A. three years. He knew it better than some–Yoni, who'd grown up in Brentwood, was already calling him for shortcuts. He was living in Los Feliz and all his friends were living in Silver Lake and Zelda was in Echo Park and he was always shooting in Burbank or Glendale or out in the desert. He'd dated a girl in Whittier for a while so he knew the hill roads there where they chased coyotes in his car. He'd stumbled up into La Cañada once before dawn with a camera in the car, the old Arri S they gave him in film school, so he knew how the sun came into the Basin over the scarps and edges of the haze-distant San Jacintos. One one of his first gigs for Tim Waz out in Duarte they strapped him to the side of a helicopter because Tim Waz didn't do helicopters and made him film a parking lot for half an hour. That was a strange one but he dug the helicopter. He knew Topanga and the Kanan Dume canyon because he and Zelda were always roaming out there and up on the Mulholland Highway, not just the Drive above Hollywood like everyone knew about but the far reach of it out into the wild above the water, where it went fuzzy into llama rescue farms and radio telescopes and tumbled down to the water where he and Zelda watched the waves. Heading back they took PCH with the windows down and they almost got it. That was as close as they came to getting it.

Yemane lived just behind Little Ethiopia and for lunch every day they walked down to Fairfax to the backalley tables where the grandmothers brought the injera without asking. Since he was with Yemane they didn't water down the spices. Yemane told him about watching the Derg jets going to bomb Addis Ababa. They drank a couple Metas each and went back to the cutting room in Yemane's garage. In the afternoons after the beers they didn't talk much. Yemane put on old Tilahun Gessesse records so Milton could cut to the beat. "Yeah," Yemane would say every so often. "Perfect."

Chip got his kid a dog for when he came to visit but the kid never came to visit, so when Chip went back up to Seattle to see his kid Milton and Zelda would walk the dog. Chip moonlit as a sound engineer so the dog's name was Tomlinson Holman and they took him to the weird wildcat lots way up in Echo Park above Elysian, letting him loose sometimes so he just vanished into the overgrowth for a half hour, lingered in the distance as the sound of assaulted goats and roosters, returned from adventure skunksprayed or sheeped. "I love dogs," Zelda said. "But I hate this fucking dog." Chip was gone a lot and when he wasn't Zelda was in a bad mood. Sometimes she called Milton at one in the morning, said she needed beer and pancakes and they'd go down to Fred's 62 or the Astro in Atwater. He got milkshakes. He flirted with the waitresses and she flirted with moving out.

"You want to see something weird?" he said one night. They parked in the Los Feliz Golf Course parking lot where a guy was asking, "Hey, you wanna party?"

"Nah," Zelda said. "I prefer downers."

"Downers do downers," he said.

Milton jumped the retaining wall and she followed him. The River in its flood channel treacled in the nightshine. With her grunt when she landed a scurrying came out from under the Boulevard piers. Shapes disappeared down the channel, things like shopping carts glinting where they caught a streetlight.

"Check it out," Milton said, nodding upriver. "Trees." In the middle of the flood control channel there was a little overgrown island, diseased acacias and saltswitches ruffling when an eighteen-wheeler blasted by on the 5 freeway hanging above.

"I heard there's otters in there," Milton said. "Maybe we should bring Tomlinson Holman."

"Yeah," she said. "Tomlinson Holman's kind of paradise, right here." They watched the dark for a while but saw no otters.

One night he drove down to San Pedro and down there L.A. was a steel town, mill after mill black and looking like the end of the world. The Vincent Thomas Bridge rose into the dark and the vapors from the foundries sculled across the water.

So from maps, or from up on the camera crane when they didn't have a remote head, or from the aircraft–he thought he got it. There was no turbulence. It caught the light dropping into the marine layer, the mountains ranging peak by peak into the wilderness right out the windshield. The city in the foothills broadened out over the plain like an effluent, rivers of railyards, the freeway clovers and trumpets, swollen with long staccato warehouse roofs going into the haze forever. Tesselated subdivisions southeast, into Riverside County. The city burned in space, visible and awesome across any intervening distance as, it is said, the Pyramids used to be, before some fuckers came to steal all the limestone.

The compass swung backwards through northwest–the compass does not rotate, the aircraft rotates around the compass–and there was a fire in the Sespe Wild above Ojai. The smoke rose in the wind off the ocean until it hit some inversion layer and the whole thing flattened and plumed into a wild pyrocumulus churning out for the horizon. It looked like a hydrogen bomb. It looked like the end of the world.

"Let's head back," the instructor said, and the fire was lost behind the wing as he turned the airplane back, the instructor on the radio saying, "Brackett UNICOM, Piper N873AE six

miles north-northwest, left downwind, landing," the city flattening as they drifted down and the prop feathered and the hills came up obscuring Pomona, the cities receding into the east–Rialto was as far as he could see, everything beyond lost in smog, before they made the downwind turn for final.

In Salt Lake it was an all-night shoot and her father was at work–"He used to teach physics but now he teaches math..."–so they slept in, had their laziest sex yet, and then she quietly railed against linguistic relativism, insisted on the physical artifacts of experience, talked about math. It didn't take much those days but he was in love. When they unpacked themselves from the sheets she was hungry. While they ate she was pretty but it wasn't just that she was pretty. Sometimes he caught her staring at something–never at him–like she were intent on mastering its silhouette to memory, not like she were surprised or expecting more but not a look of dumb content. She was curious without the apocalyptic wideeyes of the searcher–not like him, what he knew he and Zelda looked like after a couple beers, serious, drawn, brows furrowed against the worldcracking revelation sure to appear if only you stared hard enough. She was disciplined in her thought–with a half of a burger in her hand she puzzled through the contradiction he pointed out in her logic and she said, "You're right." Simple as that. When she caught him in his own simple thinking he whined and whined. "I'm not the one who ends it," he said. "I get hurt too."

"For someone who talks about data so much," she said, "you're not very responsive to evidence."

"What evidence?"

"Evidence suggests that you're a mild womanizer," she said.

"I'm–"

"No, it's okay," she said. "You're only trying, not succeeding. That's a kind of misogyny in itself, thinking you're a womanizer. There's always levels of agency. Anyway, it makes me feel you're just chasing your assumptions about me. It makes me feel in control."

"Alright," he said. "It's time for you to go spool some plastic into a can."

It was a parking garage that night; the freaks were climbing up the elevator shaft and figuring out the crossovers for the ramps. The hero and his girl kept going up up up but how high can you go? They were somewhere around the fourth level by 3 a.m. The city glittered beyond.

"Shit man, you hear that?" one of the local hires said in a dead beat. The hero and his girl were asleep against a Subaru and the gaffer was trying to remember his color temperatures. Everyone else was at craft services hitting on second choices or rolling D20s in the corners. Milton and Zelda were leaning on each other on the camera dolly and Annika was reading some Wittgenstein she'd found in Milton's back seat from before he was a philosophy dropout. The director was hogging the director's finder and the producers were somewhere in a panic, injecting codeine into their foreheads, as far as the word getting around went. Down in makeup a few dozen otherwise responsible and generous citizens of Salt Lake City were being turned into horrible monsters the likes of which the Beehive State had never seen.

"That's a fuckload of rats," another local hire said. He had the door to a utility closet open.

Milton tensioned like an electric charge were contracting his spine. He pulled Annika aside and said he was sorry. She didn't know what for. He kissed her and gathered his gear. It took him about five minutes, and then he was gone.

After the disaster in Salt Lake–an exit's less than graceful when it's at 1:47 a.m. on a dusk-to-dawn, fake phonecall in the stairwell of the parking garage just long enough to believe it was for real, shit packed quick, a promise to Zelda that he was sorry and he would be okay but she had to cover for him–Milton's next shot was for Boulder where he knew a girl. He stopped in Sugarhouse to wash his hands, but on the way out of the gas station he caught a sleeve on the postcard rack so he had to change his shirt and stop six mile markers down to wash his hands again. This time he opened the bathroom door with a five dollar bill–it was the only thing he had on him to brace against the handle, and when clear of the door he let it drop because a clean getaway was worth five bucks at least–and he leapt out into the parking lot like he were fleeing jaguars.

The throttle was easier than it had ever been and he hurtled east like he were burning straight into a star. Everything in the rearview gloamed and broke. It took an hour or two or anyway until about Park City to convince himself he wasn't fleeing in failure–he'd walked off three movies in the last three months, and he was running out of cover stories–but the mind is malleable. Failure is a kind of adventure if you're fooling yourself. If Kate had a boyfriend there was Becky in St. Louis and from there he could improvise. Elizabeth was in Louisville. Emily's sister was in Indiana somewhere. He could buy booze now so he had that going for him. He did not drink and drive only in that he slept a few hours in between.

He got the first speeding ticket somewhere before Steamboat Springs. He wasn't afraid of cops or prisons yet so he didn't bat an eye. He never paid the citation and for a while he wondered if he would get arrested somewhere, years on–but there's a statute of limitations on speeding tickets, and though it varies state by state he outlasted them all. Don't say the boy never accomplished anything. That was his first fast German car and a turbo that just tore through the miles. It was youth or the good records he bought in Salt Lake or the easy throttle that kept the speedometer higher than is strictly legal. He didn't kill himself or anyone and so it was worth what he got out of it, which is a sense that he was moving at a velocity great enough to prove his individuality in a diffident universe. If you look at it in terms of the physics, maybe it was just the world rotating too fast around him. It's impossible to disprove that he was the sole object at rest in the entire universe tumbling in madness around him. Unlikely, given entropy, but impossible to disprove. There are no priveleged observers–

Not even in the high empty tableland that he crossed alone and in gleaming and radiant fury at ninety miles an hour in the curves, where he stopped to take a picture of the fast new car (well, not *new,* but...) In the sunshine he stood on the shoulder looking west at the horizon thinking he could see something never seen by anyone, ever, statistically unlikely as it was. What is youth but not believing in statistics? On Colorado 93 in the dusk with the mountains purple on black falling west the elk had jumped the fences and they were all over the road while the suburban fathers tried to scare them off by waving their arms. He took a few pictures and got back in the car.

That first night in Boulder he gave himself a haircut with scissors he did not pay for in the bathroom of the Safeway on Arapahoe. He left the hair (and the scissors) in the sink, which

he felt bad about, but he felt worse about cleaning it up. From there and despite the flattering and raggedly uneven haircut Kate had a boyfriend so he slept in his car waking to crank the engine every two or three hours to blast the heater until it was warm enough to sleep again. In the morning she came and knocked on the window and said she was sorry. The road opened up northeast heading for Nebraska with a storm coming. He always smiled for storms, so he was smiling. He made East St. Louis by midnight, found a motel, bought Becky breakfast, got back in the car.

On a map Milton's course made little sense, bearing suddenly as it did, every four hundred miles or so, in some wildly different cardinal–it was like Coronado always turning north or south, as the Indians tricked him that the golden city was always farther into the plains. This connection occured to Milton, and even he found it distasteful. He had no fondness for precious metals.

"Ho there, Magellan," Zelda said when he called her somewhere east of Quivira.

"What'd Annika say?"

"She said to say she's sorry. I told her not to be."

"I'll be home soon."

"Take your time," Zelda said. "I'll be angling for your spot on all the gigs until you get back."

"Ha," he said. "Hang tough."

"Hang tough," Zelda said. He hesitated before he hung up, but that was all she said.

Out at Cherokee Park, the meadow was moon-bright and the tips of the leaves made the trees shine in the dark. Elizabeth, in white, stood on the hill, like a coral. A pair of lovers sat on the hood of their car. Milton caught the girl's smile once when he turned to look back. From somewhere the lisp of freeway traffic swam and a far church steeple was lit in white above the treeline. Elizabeth drank bourbon from the bottle and passed it to him.

"Have you kept your...what's the mileage thing called?"

"Odometer."

"Have you kept your odometer going since L.A.?" Elizabeth asked.

"Twenty-six hundred so far, thereabouts."

Elizabeth took the bottle back. "Do I know any of these girls?" she said.

"You met Laura at a party once, I think," he said.

"Is she like her sister?"

"Smarter," he said.

"Well, sure," she said. The lovers' car stereo was saying, "Resiliency amazes me."

"What'll you do when you exhaust all the possibilities?"

"That'll take some time," he said. "It's a big country."

"You look happy."

"I'm miserable," he said.

"But you look happy," she said.

"I see myself mostly in the eyes of women," he said.

Elizabeth looked at him for a long moment. "If that were true," Elizabeth said, "then you'd get a better haircut." She laughed in the warm summer dark, and there were just a few

fireflies out before the treeline. They got back in his car and the legs of the beautiful girl flashed once in the rearview.

Country was most of what he crossed, driving at night when the weather was clear, driving in the day if there were storms or light. He had no illusions–or he had, anyway, only minor illusions–that he were an old hero or explorer, but he saw in what he saw something that must, once, have been seen for the first time. Forests were heavy with mist when it was raining and high-altitude blue when it snowed. He pissed on many roadsides with the engine's cooling clicks bringing birds to sing from guardrails and Farm-to-Market markers–once, in headlands after the New River Gorge, a statie pulled in behind him and asked over the megaphone, Milton trying not to piss on the car when he turned away, if he was thinking about the disrespect he was showing to the Great Commonwealth of West Virginia. Disrespect apparently was not worth a ticket because the trooper took off.

It was raining in Charlottesville. Miller's was the only place open because it was a Tuesday. There were only two girls in the bar and they were talking to each other so he had a beer by himself and walked back to the car. In the morning at Mitchie Tavern he wanted to take a picture of the waitress to see if the Kodachrome would catch her red hair in the light. He said something funny and she laughed. She asked his name and then she dropped a spoon and picked it up. He said he had to go. That afternoon he walked out to the Atlantic and watched the helicopters make orbits out over the water.

He called Zelda from the Eastern Shore in the dark. She was just finishing up in Salt Lake. "How'd the rest of it go?" he said.

"Fine. I pulled focus most of the time."

"'Atta girl. Was it sharp?"

"As a tack," she said. "You doing alright?"

"I'm great," he said.

"Where are you?"

"Virginia," he said.

"Holy shit," Zelda said.

"Yeah. Never really stopped driving."

"Road warrior. Take me with you next time."

"You're going back to L.A.?"

"Gotta pay the rent," she said. "Plus, I miss it."

"You miss L.A.?"

"I know," she said. "I'm as baffled as anyone."

"I don't miss it at all," he said.

"You will," she said. "Careful you're running towards, not running from."

D.C. was abandoned when he got there. The Monument stood like a railroad spike and he ran from the car onto the grass to take a picture. No one bothered him. He drove until dawn and slept the day and drove the next four nights in the dark as though to avoid seeing anything at all.

Late into the night, in Sheridan, some smokejumpers tumbled in, having extinguished all hopes of making it to Cody for the evening– "Tom was supposed to have two so he could drive but he had four!" one of them told Milton moments before he did a huff straight for the emergency exit.

"Tim had six," Tom said.

The jukebox was saying, "I'll believe in anything."

"Where you from?" he asked the smokejumper.

"I'm from Moab," the smokejumper said.

"No shit?" Milton said. "I'm from Santa Fe. New Mexico's Moab."

He asked about jumping out of airplanes and *Young Men and Fire*. Tom was reticent until he'd had seven, and then he spoke in a lilting hammerbeat that somehow accentuated all the right words. "This was in Yellowstone, you know? The Cramer Fire. We were two ridges over from the guys who bought it. We heard them on the radio."

"Heard them...?"

"Not, no, just their last calls. They sounded a little spooked maybe, but not panicky. Anyway. Right after they rotated us to some other fire–Tim, what was that one called?"

"I can't remember," Tim said.

"Anyway. We were on helitack for the next one by the time we heard."

"Did you know the guys?"

"Not personally, not close. We must've shaken hands at some point. There's not many of us. They were from–Tim, were they from Indianola?"

"I can't remember," Tim said.

"Indianola, I think."

“Drink to them?” Milton said.

“We will,” Tom said. “That’s for us, not for you. Tell you what though. You can buy the next round in their honor. And buy two for Tim. He’s a vet. Hey! Any vets in here?”

A couple quiet dudes in the corner lifted their glasses.

“This one’s for you, brothers!” Tom said. “Iraq?”

“Sure,” said one of them.

“Fuckin’ I-raq!”

While Tom lumbered over, slapped them on the shoulders, bought them beers, Milton watched from his seat, thought of what to say to them, tried to figure their quiet calm, what that meant about how it had been for them Over There, wished he were one of them.

The smokejumpers drank and drank. None of them got either of the girls in the bar, who left while Tom was yelling at Tim to fucking do it, bro. Tim had a pool cue in his arms and was going to do something painful with it. When the smokejumpers stumbled out Milton followed but he lost them just out the rear exit, traced their evening a street or two over by drunken hollers and hoots, tried to catch up but couldn’t. When he went back to the bar he wanted to talk to the vets but they weren’t looking up from their beers. He sat on the curb, watching the stars and the roostertail of snow winded off She-Bear Mountain, backlit by the set moon like an airglow. A sign strung over Main Street said, “Welcome home, Powder River Cowboys.”

He didn’t usually get hangovers but the next morning was like somebody’d pulaski’d him right in the frontal bone. As the night came back to him in murk and searing insight, he began to remember all that he had touched, the OCD was back because the alcohol was burned out, he assembled not just the night’s scraps but began to organize the system of concentric contagions

he'd endured as though constructing a geodesic dome. The curved wear of the bar, skingrimed, the glasses probably not washed enough. The pool cues, the cash, the tap handles, the handshakes, Tim's slap on the back when he came out from the saloon-door piss-stalls. Familiar panic startled under his sternum. He went out from his room, ranged the motel campus in new snow. When the maid wasn't looking he stole soap and industrial degreaser from her cleaning cart. He was in the shower for an hour and a half. He thought about finding a bag to put the night's clothes in, but then just left them piled behind the bed. He washed his hands one more time, left the faucet running, took the late fee on the motel checkout. He was on the road by three.

And so Milton was on the western coast of Michigan, heading south, stopping in the dark to take a picture of the blue ice on the beach, the far fog coming in under the moon.

He was somewhere before Winchester, where a window threw a shell of light from its lace.

He was at an airport hotel out in Sioux Falls, sharing drinks with an insurance man from Lawrence, Kansas. "I'm from Santa Fe," Milton was saying. "New Mexico's Lawrence."

He was in Montana, driving west against the storm. It was so cold that the windshield wipers cracked clean off but the tank was full, the engine was warm, the tires were holding for now. The morning was coming up. The radio was saying, "If I was young I'd flee this town." He was grinning and flooring it into the weather.

He was in West Texas one night, a thunderstorm skylighting the grid of Farm-to-Markets arcblue against the plain, and a billion frogs came up out of the earth. He learned later that the

tadpoles sleep in the dirt until the scent of rain brings their transformation. The frogs coated the surface of the road for thirty miles. He did not hate frogs but that night alone he must have killed a hundred million of them, laying armageddon in gutstrewn ribbon behind him. Frog intestines caked the undercarriage of that car, until a couple years later, when he crashed it.

Milton was up on an overpass in Nevada, watching a prison crew going through the sage picking up airplane bottles. They were all younger than he would have thought. The warden eyed him for a little while but left him alone. Out over the desert a fighter jet practicing racetracks left silent contrails wide across the sky.

Milton was in Maine the next time he called Zelda. She was back in L.A. and she'd met a girl.

"Oh yeah?" Milton said.

"She wants me to come stay with her in Topanga."

"What about Chip?"

"Who knows," Zelda said. "When'll you come back?"

"I don't know," he said. "Couple more weeks maybe. I've been making up this story for the bartenders that I'm a wildlife photographer and Outside sent me up here to do underwater portraits of lobsters."

Zelda was quiet for a little while. "Are they buying it?"

"Unclear," he said.

"Well," she said. "At least you're finally realizing your dreams of being the world's premiere lobster portraitist...What other roles have you made up for yourself?"

"I don't know," he said. "I love it out here, everywhere, but. I don't know. Maybe I'm just trying to stay ahead of something."

"Yeah," she said.

"I'm just bouncing from girl to girl and vision to vision."

"Well, that sounds like you."

"I'm lost."

"I get it. We all need to feel gorgeous sometimes. Brilliant."

"If I'm being honest I'm scared I'm coming unmoored."

"That'll pass."

"I love it out here but I'm lonely."

"How many girls have you slept with?"

"Just one. Kissed a couple though."

"Milton, does it make me a bad feminist to say you're living the dream?"

"No but I'm pretty sure it makes *me* a bad feminist."

"You think they're after anything you're not? Everyone gets lonely."

"Sure," he said. "I'm not convinced."

"Listen, I might not be here when you get back."

"Why not?"

"I...I got offered to operate on a doc."

"What's it about?"

"The Dalai Llama."

"What?"

"So, yeah, I'm going to Daramshala."

"No shit."

"Yeah."

"Well," he said. "You get to go find it, over there. Whatever it is. I'm proud of you."

"I'm proud of you too," she said. "I have to go. You're tougher than you think. Don't drive too fast."

"I've already gotten four speeding tickets."

"Fuck it then. Drive faster. Don't be an asshole. Find it, whatever's out there. Come home soon."

He didn't.

Milton was in Newport News, and before the cops scared him off he and Slim were talking about America. Slim had lost his legs in the shipyard. It had been a hydraulic jig for pressing armor plate. Torpedo belt, the thick stuff. That shit can take a hit. Milton asked what the machines looked like and Slim said, huge, man, huge. Like pictures of old ironworks. He'd been in Vietnam, he said. Below them in the yard they'd laid the keel for the USS *Gerald R. Ford*. They talked for a while and then Milton offered to buy Slim lunch so they walked down to the jerk chicken place. Milton didn't push Slim's wheelchair. Slim didn't seem to mind; his arms were thick as cable stays. When they sat in the restaurant Milton sat weirdly askew. He was afraid to brush his clothing againt Slim's wheelchair. He didn't want to be afraid but he was.

"What was Vietnam like?"

"Not too bad," Slim said. "Not too bad for me. Just on a couple different destroyers."

"What do you do now?" Milton said.

"Well, they take okay care of me down the way," Slim said.

"You homeless?"

"Yeah," Slim said. "But it's not too bad. I get by."

They sat for a few hours, and they traded life stories, and stories about girls, and they talked about The Movies and about The War. Cameras, guns, cars, their dads. Slim didn't have any kids. Slim had never made it to New Mexico but he heard about Colorado. Milton told him about what he'd seen Out There. The afternoon was lowering. The waitress had disappeared. They'd had a few beers. Milton forgot to be afraid, and he let his pantsleg brush against the frame of Slim's wheelchair. He didn't notice and he never knew.

He walked Slim back to the bluff. He was taking some more pictures because the light was better. The frame of the ship in the yard below stretched into the haze.

"Gets cold here winters, no?"

"Pretty cold," Slim said.

"Pretty fuckin' cold, I bet."

"I get by. I been thinkin' about tryin' to get to California, someday."

"California?" Milton said.

"Yeah," Slim said. "San Diego. I was there a lot, in Vietnam. In and out."

"It's pretty," Milton said.

"Sure," Slim said. "And they got the ships, you know, the big Navy base there. I'd like to stay near the ships. You got California plates. You from out there?"

"Not from there, but. I live in L.A. now."

"L.A. Never made it. Like to see it, someday."

"It's alright," Milton said. "I'm headed back there, soon."

"Man, I'd love to get out to California," Slim said. There was a tone in his voice. "It's not easy for me to get around," he said. "I'm not just another hitchhiker. I'd need somebody who'd trust me, who's in it for the long haul." Slim was smiling. "I'm not tryin' to impose on you, man."

"Hell, that's an idea," Milton said. "If that's what you're asking."

"I might ask. Not right now, but I might ask, you know. If you're up for it."

"I want to be up for it," Milton said. "I'd like to but I don't know if I can."

"Well, it's up to you, then, brother. Whatever you gotta do to know."

"It's not paradise, like they say," Milton said.

"I know," Slim said. "I got no illusions. I'm tired though. The winters out here, they get hard. I got people, they take care of me, but it gets hard."

"L.A.'s a bad place for a homeless dude," Milton said.

"Not many good places for us," Slim said. "Just need some new scenery."

"I have an illness," he said.

"I been sick," Slim said.

"No, I mean. I'm not good with strangers."

"You seem alright," Slim said.

"I get freaked out when people touch my stuff."

"I don't gotta touch your stuff."

"I mean, like my car."

"I'm not sick," Slim said.

"I know," Milton said. "I. It's not personal."

"I know it's not personal. You're alright. But I'm not sick. They got showers, down at the shelter."

"I know," Milton said. "It's not logical."

"You one of those people who wash a lot?" Slim said.

"I guess," Milton said.

"What's it called again?"

"Obsessive-compulsive disorder," Milton said.

"Yeah," Slim said. "Shit. I had a dog had it. Dogs can get it, right?"

"Yeah," Milton said.

"Licked his skin off."

"Yeah," Milton said.

"Blood all over the carpet. Man. That was a hard one to watch."

"I'm sorry."

"We all got somethin'," Slim said. "I ain't got no fuckin' legs, that's mine."

"I'm not saying it's the same."

"You don't gotta say," Slim said. "Doesn't have to be the same. All hurts."

"I wish I could take you."

"I know, man. I know."

"I'm sorry."

"I know, man. Listen, you gotta go. Here come the cops. They'll shoot your ass, you takin' pictures of the shipyard like that."

"Good luck," Milton said.

"You too. I'll get out there to California someday. I'll look you up when I do. What's your name?"

"Milton," he said.

"Nah, your full name?"

Milton told him. He asked if he could take Slim's picture. Slim flashed a peace sign. Then the cops were there, said Hey, Slim, and told Milton to stop taking pictures. Milton shook Slim's hand. Once he was around the corner he ran into a drugstore and spent fifteen minutes washing. He used soap and borate cleaner. His hands were bleeding by the time he came out.

After that it was the coalworks overlooking Hampton Roads, the warships gray in the water, and the last edge of the continent. He jumped the fence at First Landing State Park and walked out to the Atlantic.

Before he dropped out of film school, Milton had taken a geography class called "Los Angeles and the American Dream." It seemed to just about sum it all up, or tie it all together. They read *City of Quartz* and they took a field trip to Atwater, to fish snails from the channelized headwaters of the L.A. River, where there were, supposedly, river otters coming back, nesting in the wild islands springing up untended and unheeded, when it rained. They had a lecture right there, under the diseased acacias, the saltswitches ruffling when an eighteen-wheeler blasted by on the 5 freeway, hanging above.

"There should be no city here," the geography professor said. "There is no consistent source of water. This, the L.A. River, this was invented, in the 1930s. Before that it flowed where it would. Who brought all the water? Who built this river? Who built this city?"

"William Mulholland?" somebody said.

The geographer, thick white prophet's beard, stood on the smooth rocks, framed by the splayed fangs of a flood control works built back in the thirties, by, yes, Mulholland, The Villain.

"L.A. was an unpredictable swamp. The Spanish, up on the bluff at Bunker Hill, died mostly of malaria. Santa Barbara was the real prize. Monterey. Who's been to Santa Barbara?"

A few of them raised their hands.

"Who here's had malaria?"

They laughed.

"What's Santa Barbara like?" the geographer asked.

"Pretty," one of the girls said.

The geographer smiled. "Do you think it's pretty here?"

"In its way," the girl said, finally. Milton got her number a bit deeper into the semester. Years later she would call him, drunk, from D.C. She had twins. She was working at Interior. She hoped things could still be saved. Was he still in The Movies?

The geographer said, "In its way. Only ever in its way.

"This is an invented place, Los Angeles. Our task is to consider who invented it. Why it was invented. The waterworks were invented. The freeways were invented. The orange groves were invented. The surf music was invented, the palm trees were invented, the views were

invented. The Valley was invented. The river was invented. The Movies were invented. For what?"

No one spoke.

"What's the point of L.A.?" The geographer looked at them in survey.

"L.A. is what they invented to sell the American Dream. What does that mean about Los Angeles? If Los Angeles works, what does that mean about America? If Los Angeles fails, what does that mean about America? Is L.A. working? Is L.A. failing? I'm asking you. What is this place? What does it mean?"

The geographer was backlit. Milton could see the cliff going up into Echo Park behind him. The traffic roar muted. A helicopter went over. The girl glanced at him. The light was just right.

Milton raised his hand.

He was out of money and his cellphone had been turned off. He called Yemane from a payphone in Cedar City. He wore blue nitrile gloves and spent five minutes with a bleach sprayer soaking the phone. He held it a few inches from his ear.

"Yemane," he said.

"Hello? Mani lisili?" Yemane said.

"Yemane, it's Milton."

"Hello? Speak up. I can't hear you."

Milton held the receiver closer to his mouth. It brushed against his chin and he cursed.

"It's Milton."

"Hi, Milton," Yemane said.

"Hi."

He didn't say anything for a while. "Are you alright?" Yemane said.

"I'm sorry I bailed," he said.

"It's alright," Yemane said. "Yonatan is cutting for me."

"Okay," Milton said.

"Are you alright?" Yemane said.

"Yeah."

"What are you calling about?"

"I'm in Utah."

"Oh," Yemane said. Some cops came out from the station across from the motel, eyed him with the gloves and the bleach, disappeared in siren.

"Listen," Milton said. "Could you wire me some money?"

"Why?" Yemane said.

"I'm stuck in Utah. I'm out of gas."

"And out of money."

"Yeah."

"Weren't you working in Utah?"

"Yeah but. They haven't paid me yet."

"Can't you ask them to pay you early?"

"I walked off the job."

"Milton."

“I know,” Milton said.

“Are you in any danger?” Yemane said.

“What? No, I’m just stuck here until–”

“Are you healthy?”

Milton looked at the gloves. “Sure,” he said.

“Then you have to find your own way back,” Yemane said. “I’m sorry. I can’t help you down this road, Milton.” He hung up.

Milton waited for a long time. He took off the gloves and dug around in his kit bag and then put on fresh gloves and went back to the phone. It rang twice.

“Hello?” Annika said.

Even Tomboys Get the Blues

From the window of the turboprop coming down from Dharamshala all she could see was the haze of the plain. Somewhere out there were a billion people but they were lost in the smog. Outbound Customs in Delhi took longer than it should have because of the cameras and because the producer was afraid the X-rays would zap the tapes–"That's not really how it works," Zelda kept trying to reassure her–and then she woke up with the Pacific out the window marbled and blue to the edge of the globe. She couldn't figure or fix herself beyond Lower Stratosphere, Orion Arm–which side of the airplane was New Zealand? What day was it? She slept until the stewardess said it was Tuesday and the thrust reversers roared the jet back from the end of the runway and the surfers at Docweiler State Beach. She forgot the great line she had prepared for "Anything to declare?" and after she squinted against the light and Shannon pulled up with her A/C compressor threatening catastrophe she fell asleep against the cracking sill of her door until she woke up in Echo Park.

"See you soon," Shannon said, heaving Zelda's heavy backcountry pack against the jamb. "I expect you to be generous in the distribution of your revelations."

She wasn't. She didn't answer anyone's calls for a week and a half, even when Chip asked if she still had his birth certificate hidden away in any of her files, when he said Kieran was into cameras and did she have any she could give him for his birthday, when he showed up

at her door saying he was different and trying to be a good father made him by necessity a better lover. She called the cops but he was gone by the time they showed up with dawn coming. “Don’t sweat it,” she said.

“Your call,” the cops said. “Next time though dial your marriage counselor instead.”

Amanda, though, she called back. “I miss you,” she said finally to her, Amanda even over the phone breathy, sucking in her chest, like she had a lemon in her teeth. “But don’t tell anyone I said that.”

“You’ll love it here,” Amanda said over the phone. “Nobody will bother us here. I promise.”

When the goats calmed on the hill and the light was right and the jacarandas were purple in the draw, Topanga was paradise. Zelda had always thought she was too smart for paradise but there she was. The evening fogged the canyon. Amanda kept cedar in a stack against the south wall, to keep it dry. “Get more wood,” she would say, reaching for the saké, and Zelda would take hours because even with the nightshine from Malibu and the Valley the autumn asterisms fired so you could almost see Cygnus, the Swan, heading for San Diego before the cold came.

“Zeus must be up there somewhere,” Amanda had said, gesturing vaguely north, one of the first nights when she still pointed out the stars. “Creepy fucker.”

“Men,” Zelda said.

“You’re too cute to be sarcastic,” Amanda said.

“Nobody’s ever said that to me before.”

“Well, that’s probably the first time you’ve worn a flower dress, no?”

Amanda was wrong, but not by much.

After they had beer they had coffee to mute out the coffee and after that they had coffee to mute out the beer. They switched to liquor every night somewhere before midnight and after they had sex Zelda would go out onto the deck to look at the light, here even despite the mountains, in the south, Santa Monica and Malibu and the long jaw of the coast firing the night coming up. Amanda was a good sleeper and snored, so Zelda was alone. Most nights she was out there for an hour or two but some nights she couldn't think herself to sleep so she just watched the helicopters crossing east and thought of the water and she drank and drank until her eyes closed around four thirty a.m., dark, if there were darks, finally over her, and Amanda found her out there at dawn and brought her back in to the bed and folded a blanket over her.

When Milton got back to L.A. all Zelda had to say was, "You'll have to tell me about the answer to it all."

"I'll tell you my answer and you tell me yours."

"You did find it, didn't you?"

"If I didn't then I never will."

"True story."

"And Daramshala? Did your vision quest illuminate?"

"Everything and the universe. The Bigfoot?"

"Sure."

"I need a ride," she said. "They booted me."

She had thought maybe there would be something different in his aspect–she was trained, as he was, to think wisdom was found Out There–but he seemed tired more than anything. He had a new car, bought, he said, halfway through, when the old one exploded. This one was also red, and faster.

"So, what was it like?" Milton said.

"What was what like?"

"India."

"Oh," Zelda said. "It was beautiful. It was...well, I need some time, to sort through it, to figure out what it means. No grand revelations, not yet, but...well, the Dalai Llama told me some dirty jokes."

"The Dalai Llama told you dirty jokes?"

"They were pretty good."

"Is that what spiritual salvation is? Dirty jokes?"

"I guess the dirty jokes don't hurt."

After the bar they hit the Brite Spot and after the coffee went back to beer. "Chip's out of town," she said. "I'm glad," she said. "Does that make me a bad girlfriend?"

"No," he said. "Your shitty handjobs make you a bad girlfriend."

"Kieran came to visit last week."

"That's his kid?"

"Yeah," she said.

"How was that?"

"It was hard," Zelda said. "I want to be good to him but it's like the best thing I could ever do for him would be to tell him his dad is an asshole and he should make peace with that."

"He's twelve?"

"Thirteen."

"He already knows his dad's an asshole, then."

"I guess you're right."

"When are you going to change your number?" Milton said.

"I don't know. Soon. I just haven't had the energy, you know?"

Zelda and Amanda never listened to *Zuma* on Zuma, but only because it never occured to them. When she was with her they went down to Zuma Beach every day–Zelda with the no-shit aviators she had stolen from Milton, who had been stupid to spend so much money on sunglasses, and Amanda always age indeterminate somewhere between twenty-five and fifty, old enough to know better, young enough for fuck you, man, as she said to the Cal Parks meter maid giving her a ticket for parking in front of a standpipe. "Amanda," Zelda said.

"Fuck you too," Amanda said.

"Sorry," Zelda said to the meter maid.

There was a film crew shooting fifty yards down the beach–"F950," Zelda said, though Amanda would not have known what that was–and they had the actress in a bikini and three grips up to the knees with gold bounce boards trained on her. Amanda went straight for the waves. The water washing in over her feet seemed to calm Amanda's temper but not her tongue–

when she said, “It feels good!” and Zelda came laughing and shivering into the water after, Amanda kissed her. Zelda pulled back.

“Somebody might see,” she said, nodding to the film crew. “I might know some of them.”

“So?” Amanda said, moving to goose.

“Rumors.”

“What the fuck Zelda, I’m tired of your paranoid bullshit,” Amanda said, and she walked back to the car with the wind bursting sand from her foosteps.

When they got back to Topanga Canyon, Amanda vanished into her greenhouse (“Don’t fucking barge into my greenhouse, Zelda,” was advice she’d given, the first time) and pouted for the rest of the afternoon slanting hazed and wild into the headlands above the house–but she made up for it by coming out at dusk dressed in beads and old gorgeous Navajo shawls and she kissed Zelda on the lips and she said, “I’m sorry,” and she cooked dinner just perfect, wild squashes, lamb even though she said she was a vegetarian–couscous bought not “...at your spotless holistic Silver Lake health food store where they make sure all the shopping carts roll straight with the flow of your chi, sweetie,” but from, as Amanda called him, “...a sweaty little fucker,” who had a stall by the turnout where Latigo hit Kanan Dume. He saved for Amanda the most ripe of his figs, because his children did not talk to him anymore, and no one else could tell the difference like she could.

“He’s very sweet,” Amanda said.

“He’s a creep,” Zelda said, but she cooed at the couscous, every time. She gushed to friends about it. For a while she almost bought into the practicality Milton offered in

response–"I think they've got couscous pretty fungible at this point, dude"–but sometimes she thought maybe Amanda was right, that there were people still in the world who had access to knowledge more divine than the others, who knew how to pick a thing just right, who saw through the sorry veil of complacency the modern world had duped us all into, that once we knew how to make couscous, God damn it, and wasn't that a better time?

"The syphilis was better in the Stone Age too," Milton said to her, when she met him again for beer, again at The Bigfoot.

"Fuck you," she said, but mildly, because he'd just gotten her onto a feature out in Thousand Oaks. Annika from Salt Lake City had just moved to L.A. and was living with him until she found a place. Zelda suspected things were a bit one-sided but had learned to stop asking about his girlfriends.

"I'm also offended you don't like *my* couscous," he said.

"Oh my God Milton the way this woman cooks."

"I don't doubt it," he said. "She's got you pretty well stolen out to paradise. Does Chip know?"

"I'm not talking to him anymore."

"But does he know?"

"I'm not sure," Zelda said. "You know it's not because I have a mean boyfriend that I'm dating a woman, right?"

"That'd be a little simplistic even for a brute like me," Milton said. "Plus, I hear she can cook."

"I want to have you over for dinner."

"I won't refuse," he said.

"She's...."

"Zelda, I know your girlfriend's a handful."

"She's not my girlfriend. And I was going to say...unique."

"Haven't you heard, old friend?" he said. "It's 2008. Perspective is everything."

"See you tomorrow," she said.

She drove back out to Topanga taking Mulholland the whole way. She did not have Milton's penchant for driving way too fast–her Kia, anyway, demanded a certain and wholly spiritual respect for the limits of shitty brakes–but even at forty miles an hour, the city turning below her was like proof she was doing something right. The light turned over the world at such speed sure as any, and when she got to Topanga, she slept and slept and slept, snoring and startling and waking Amanda to stare at her gaping teeth and the curve of her collarbone fooled she was as any man that the trick was in the chest of the girl, inhale, exhale, for the hours before the sun lifted. Then Zelda had to get to set and Amanda complained about the drone of the alarm.

Zelda said she wasn't a lesbian to the boys in the industry–the boys besides Milton, anyway–less as a point of pride and more as a mechanism of self-defense. They liked a girl who went down on a girl–especially at parties, which they saw sometimes on the internet. They did not like a girl who went down on a girl in private. The trick was to be vague in the details and to hope they would assume the best.

Most did. She was tough and they thought, "Why not?" She fit in with their view of the world, then. A girl–a chick, really–as tough-as-nails as Zelda, well, of course she would tear

some panties off every so often. It made sense. It seemed right, in the way that the promise of their burgeoning success seemed right. There was an order to the world and Zelda fit right into it.

What didn't fit into it–and so, what she did not show them–were those Topanga evenings she went back to after Martini, when she spent very little time indeed going down on anyone girl or otherwise, but just watched the chickens cluck and strut out of the shadows drawing down from the ridge, because even the birds know not to be caught in the dark.

"Bring them down from the high pasture," Amanda learned to say to her–and Zelda learned that what she meant was to go halfway up the canyon's escarpment, open the gate, call out in the failing light to the goats who whispered out into the altitude, "Baaa!" and yet as if her voice was a balm or the last and final word of the protector, the animals came down from the hillside where they ate wild quince and the flamethrower leaves of the chapparal. They followed her down to the pen in the near-dark and did not bray or terror when she locked them in for the night. There was a feeling that came over her when she latched shut the gate that there was some other world wholly divided from or at least denied her, in her life, in the city, in her trade of machines–that there were simpler rules even than that the film must be threaded properly through the movement of the camera. Here there were good beasts that nipped and licked at her knuckles where she laughed them into the gate.

"You're good with animals," Amanda said, one night, watching her.

"I don't know what that means," Zelda said.

"Take a compliment," Amanda said.

After Amanda went to bed, Zelda sat staring into the dark of the window–old shitty windows, handmade but not charmingly, glass that warped and corroded the galaxies casting down, when she might have been, in that canyon so wild and reckless, able to see stars and stars and stars and stars. Then the sun came up, and she finally slept a few hours before crew call.

When Zelda was talking about the figseller over coffee they were waiting for the camera truck. Kalsin was the DP and Milton had somehow got Annika onto the movie as the script girl. They were shooting a half-and-half out in Simi Valley, in a cul-de-sac of a subdivision laid out years back, foundations and all, but never finished–the mist off the water wraithed in through the few platform frames rising like shoalstuck tankers. They parked across the road by the chainlink of the last holdout against the developer's eminent domain, the mobile home's sidings were splayed like birchbark, there were two big pitbulls in the fence looking sleepy and sad. "Dogs in this country," Kalsin said, "are too nice."

The film was called *Sharks Versus Nazis.* They were shooting well into the second act and the sharks had learned how to pilot balloons. It was all going to be CGId in.

Unlikely as it was, Kalsin knew the figseller when Zelda brought him up: "His name is Berkant and it's a crime to call him that because he's a liar."

"He's not that bad," Zelda said.

"He stole a box truck full of pickles," Kalsin said.

"Wait, *that* guy? The Turkish pickle guy?" Milton said.

"There's a pickle guy?"

"He is not a kind man," Kalsin said.

"I hate that fucking guy," Milton said.

Zelda stared.

"We were supposed to get paid in pickles," Milton said. "What? Have you ever *had* Turkish pickles?"

"Tell me where his stand is," Kalsin said.

"He sells the best couscous."

"He probably stole it."

"He's just trying to make a living."

"Zelda. It's not right, what was done."

Kalsin was Turkish by way of Rajasthan and so he spoke with a mild English accent that seemed sometimes to surprise him as much as it did everyone else. He'd been in Hollywood since 2000 and while he chased being a cinematographer he paid the rent as an actor. Although he bore no particular resemblance to any well-known international terrorist he had played Osama Bin Laden in twelve entirely unrelated made-for-TV specials. His tracking-down of and subsequent enraged brawl with Berkant, the pickle-thief-turned-honest-figpeddler, later became something of a minor legend in the lower rungs of the film industry, whispered from grip to grip in the hushed darkness of soundstages; "Kalsin sticks up for us! Kalsin got his crew vengeance! Sure, they were working, er, for pickles, but at least he settled the score!"

Kalsin, after playing Bin Laden for the thirteenth time, gave up and moved to Croatia, but for many years after his departure his name was only ever issued in awed whisper and he was pantheoned beside other such icons as Mike Jones (whom everyone said they knew at no more

than two degrees remove, and whose mythology was known, by then, to all). In the glossary of saints they kept in their imaginary yet communal history, Kalsin would become a deacon at least.

"Really though," Zelda said. "They're just figs, right?"

"Women in this country," Kalsin said, "are too nice."

They started shooting around eleven once the haze broke up a little. The crane grip was a dude named Nick Smith, in from North Carolina, pink and blue in surfer clothes, neon sunglasses, always chomping broccoli even as he angled the crane. "How's the view from up there?" Zelda yelled up to Milton whose legs dangled from the chair in space.

"I can see some rich guy's house," Milton said. Annika was looking up from her chair by the director's monitor, ignoring the script open on her knees, watching Milton and Kalsin swing through the sky.

After a few shots he called down from the crane asking for the 18mm, Zelda did not answer. "Zelda," he said. She looked up.

"What?"

"18mm, please."

Zelda was watching the light play over the mountains. "Okay," she said. She broke from her pose slowly, like she were murmuring up from sleeping pills.

She hadn't thought herself the sort, then, to be lost in the dreamland of a lover. It didn't match her image of herself; she tried but could not remember if this had ever happened before. She appeared self-assured because she was. Contemplating her own behavior struck her as alien–so she asked Milton to forgive her for an off day when they were packing up after Martini.

"You alright?" he said.

"Distracted," she said.

"By?"

"Who knows," Zelda said.

"Even tomboys get the blues, huh?"

"Must be the spirit influence of the moon mother. See you tomorrow."

Further into the season, Chip threatened to kill himself, or to kill her–the wording was just vague enough, for her, to justify not filing a restraining order–so she slept at Milton's place for a few nights. "Where's Annika?" she asked.

"She moved out," Milton said. "I think we broke up."

Zelda and Milton held each other in the dark more out of a sense of mutual commitment than of lust, and they were right, because in the morning both felt better. When she rose with the dawn he was still sleeping and he was out of coffee so she left. Eventually she moved out but not in with Amanda–she found a place up in Echo Park where the neighbors kept roosters. Amanda called every few weeks, said, "I miss you, love," and Zelda made the night drive down Sunset, all the way down, Pacific Palisades mute and perfect in the fog, the water under the moon, and Amanda always up in her canyon waiting in the doorframe. She wasn't sure if she even liked the woman, or if she were just in love with the house.

Sometimes Annika would show up on a movie–she seemed to be testing every water imaginable, this month she was a makeup girl, that month she was in the art department, and then Zelda wouldn't see her for a few months. They never talked much. Annika and Milton seemed secular enough, they made a show of not being in love, but she kept catching one staring at the

other, or his knee against hers when she slummed it on the camera dolly. Zelda's on-again-off-again with Amanda was on-again-off-again, unpredictable. Amanda had an ex-wife somewhere who kept moving back in, moving back out. Zelda was alone, so when Amanda called her back to Topanga, she went. She was losing track of time.

By spring, though, they'd all got their chemistries a little more in check, they were on the back of a process trailer, legs dangling, smiling in the sunshine, it was spring, everything was great, and then the camera just turned off. "Uhhh," Milton said.

Griffith Park was green from good winter rains. The water in the distance glittered. There hadn't been any fires that year. There were rumors of mountain lions sneaking in, jumping over the 405–slinking in the dark along the Pilgrimage Bridge, blending in with the graffiti marked out, "Love, love, love." It was 2009 at this point, a good couple years before the Parks Service caught P-22–P as in Puma–and started tracking him. For now the cat lingered as a curious desire in the eyes of the children whirling the Merry-Go-Round, the shuddering of stalled horses at the Equestrian Center, the eagle stare of young camera technicians, waiting between takes, watching the brush.

"He could be stalking us–*right now!*" Zelda said, grabbing Katy Culpeper and pretending to push her off the truck.

"Damn it Zelda, I have enough trouble sleeping as it is."

"You're too young to have trouble sleeping," Zelda said.

"Well then stop telling me I'm going to get eaten by mountain lions."

"Grow a pair," Zelda said.

"Alright, we're going again," the 1st AD said from the cab of the truck, walkie talkie in his hand. "Camera, you set?"

"Camera's set," Milton said.

"Sound speed."

"*Tyke Myson: Beverly Hills Marriage Counselor*, Scene Fourteen Able, Take Three."

"Roll camera."

"Speed."

"Marker."

The truck lurched back out from the lot and snored up Western Canyon, Milton cradled in the trailer behind the black box of the camera, Zelda pulling focus, Katy Culpeper, their newest hire, straddling the safety rail and looking out over the city. Milton kept one eye open when operating–or tried to, he was getting better at it, but after looking around like a chameleon for a second his composition started to drift so he had to concentrate. The electronic finder was low-resolution, prone to moiré, and so he just kept the lower right corner on the yellow line of the road. In the subcompact–the picture car–the two romantic leads were reaching the crisis point of their relationship. They had Abraham, the little person famous, among those who frequented the straight-to-DVD section of empty video stores, for his portrayal of Tyke Myson, Dwarf Boxer, sitting in the back of the car in his oversized boxing gloves.

At the big curve before the slope to the Observatory, the camera turned off again.

"Cut," Milton said. "What the fuck? That's the same spot as last time."

"Reset, reset," the 1st AD said into the walkie.

When they got back down to the staging lot Tim Waz was displeased. “What’s going on, guys? We’re losing light.”

“The camera keeps crashing at the same turn in the road.”

“Are your batteries–”

“Yes the batteries are charged,” Milton said. “Let’s try again.”

They tried, in fact, three more runs, the truck hauling the process trailer up the serpentine, the little Honda whirring up after it, Abraham in the backseat quipping one-liners while the leads highlighted each others’ hilarious misdeeds, and on the same curve–in the same radian of the same curve, even–the viewfinder glitched a torrent of pixelated blues and key greens and then the camera tripped off.

“I swear to God if RED isn’t out of business in six months I’m going to kill somebody,” Milton said back in the lot.

“It’s the Digital Revolution, man,” Zelda said. “It’s progress, man. It’s the democratization of cinema, man.”

“Gimme RED’s number,” he said.

RED was, that year, the big frontrunner in the switch away from film to digital cinema cameras. Still photographers had already been shooting digital for years, but motion cameras were a bit trickier, and someone somewhere had a business degree, because RED was selling their cameras for about ten grand. They cost quite a bit more than that to build, but there was market capitalization to be cornered, and when a film camera cost as much as a house did anywhere but Los Angeles, producers were salivating to buy REDs by the dozen, fire whole tribes of cameraperson–“What do you need a loader for, if there’s no film anymore?”–and pay

the remnants fifty bucks because why should we pay more for the camera operator than for the camera? By 2013 the big German camera makers had caught up but for now the bottom was dropping out of the market. Milton had gotten evicted from his place in Mount Washington because his paychecks kept bouncing. He let slip to Zelda, after much barleywine, that he'd borrowed $3300 from Annika for the first-last-deposit on a place up in Eagle Rock.

Of course, beyond all the bouncing checks, camerapeople were even *more* displeased that RED made shitty cameras.

"It's crashing on the exact same turn, every time," Milton was saying to the tech support people.

"Are the batteries–"

"Yes the fucking batteries are charged."

"Hang on," the tech support guy said. They'd met a few RED guys at trade shows. They all wore Oakleys, they spoke only to Milton even with Zelda looking capable and emanent beside him, they wouldn't shut up about *The Rules of the Game*. "Seriously, bro, I'm swamped in pussy. You gotta try it."

"I'm doing okay, but thanks," Milton would say. Zelda, at trade shows, mostly practiced rolling her eyes.

"Yeah, but when's the last time you banged *two* supermodels at once?" the RED guys would say. Milton and Zelda stopped going to trade shows.

"Where are you shooting?" the tech support guy said. Milton had him on speakerphone and Zelda, practicing on the gearhead with a laser pointer aimed at the anelemma she'd taped out on the side of the grip truck, cocked her head to listen.

"Griffith Park."

"A-ha," the tech said. "Are there trees?"

"What?" Milton said. Zelda stopped practicing, cocked an eyebrow, mouthed *Are there trees?*

"Are there trees where you are?"

"Yeah," Milton said. "We're in Griffith Park. There are trees."

"What species of tree?"

"What?"

"What species of tree is present on the curve where the camera shuts down?"

"I don't know," Milton said. "Eucalyptus?"

"No, eucalyptus won't do it..."

"There are some pines," Zelda said.

"What type of pine?"

"I don't know what kind of pine," Milton said.

"Well, certain species of lodgepole have been known to produce excessive detail, causing a bit flip in our proprietary compression algorithm, which–"

Milton hung up. "Is this thing insured? Because I'm going to drop it off a mountain."

"Now, now, we just need to find a chainsaw," Zelda said. Katy Culpeper was laughing and word was passing through the grips, who began to cackle.

"The wave of the future, man," one of them was saying. "The wave of the future!"

The next day, the location managers assured them there were very few pines and certainly no lodgepoles along the alternate stretch of Canyon Lake Drive they'd found. It was over below

the Hollywood Sign, but they didn't have permits, so that morning they assembled in the producer's driveway in Bel Air, convoyed down Sunset with the camera at idle as the would-be stars and starlets watched from patios of restaurants they could not afford (the producers were fronting the tab). The truck snuck up Beachwood and got lost in the warren of gorgeous ridge roads up there. Zelda had her aviators on, Katy Culpeper had switched to Ray-Bans, Milton wished he had a bandana to look as cool as either of them, knees locked over the rails, wind in their hair.

"I think we're supposed to go left here," the drivers kept saying, and eventually the AD said they'd just head back down to Gower and film on the way. On the way down Milton caught a lodgepole with a corner and the camera tripped off. Katy spent the better part of half an hour talking him down from the roof of the truck, where he had the camera up over his head and was threatening to throw it into a ravine. Abraham was laughing and laughing.

"Do it!" Abraham was shouting. "Do it!"

"Don't encourage him!" Katy said.

"Do it, Milton!"

"I'll do it for you, Abraham!" Milton said. He didn't.

Zelda did not pay much attention, and just watched the sky. When Milton finally calmed down he handed her the camera and she almost dropped it.

"Hey," he said. "Wake up."

"What?"

"You're doing that thing where you do the thing."

"I gotta get out of town," she said.

"What?" he said. "It's April. Season of plenty."

"Whatever. When this movie's over, let's go up to Seattle."

"I'm broke," Milton said.

"Borrow something. Anyway." She nodded to the car pulling up, angry Assistant Director getting out. "Picture's up," she said.

They didn't go up to Seattle that season. As the weeks went Milton vanished more and more often. Zelda let him come and go. He was her best friend but his center of gravity seemed off, or something. She figured he'd be dead sooner or later. He rotated wrong or anyway dangerously, out of phase, out of control. After a few months not talking she was always surprised when he answered the phone. Later she would encapsulate his neurosis and name it surfeit of psychiatry but that was not quite right. She told the joke as a confession, as though she thought she had failed him.

"Have you heard from Milton?" loaders would say, on movies.

"Yeah," she would say. "He's doing okay for losing his shit." They always hired clever loaders, both of them, so the loaders laughed.

"Guess there's a free rung on the ladder," the loaders said. They were smiling.

"Maybe soon," Zelda said. "Not just yet. We're on 5228 today. Mark it red. We'll start with the shortends."

"Hey," Chip said.

"Hey," Zelda said.

The October rains had cleared the smog from the sky so from Franklin she could see down to the bay. Chip's place was just as much of a disaster as she'd left it, half-assembled speaker cabinets scattered in the kitchen, old pad kee mow styrofoams piled six high, roaches scattering with the light. In the living room were conspicuous rectangles undirtied, carpet a different shade, from where her furniture had been before she moved out.

"Sorry," he said. "It's kind of a mess."

"Well," she said. "Now I'm worried about you. Was it like this when Kieran came?"

"Not really," he said.

"How's his mom?" she said.

"Fuck her," Chip said.

"Okay," Zelda said. "Well."

"It's in here," Chip said.

The Mamiya was sitting out of its case on his drafting table–he had it flat and besides the camera it was piled with stained and dogeared screenplays and pictures of Chip in various unlikely facial expressions.

"You got new headshots," she said.

"Yeah. Shannon did them."

"Oh," Zelda said. "She didn't tell me."

"It's nothing–"

"I don't care, Chip. Where's the case?"

"For what?"

“For the camera,” Zelda said, taking the Mamiya, checking the lens (dirty), digging a loaded magazine out from under a wet towel.

“You didn’t give me the case.”

“Of course I did, Chip.”

“Well, I don’t know,” he said.

“I knew I shouldn’t have given–”

“It’s here somewhere, just–”

“It’s fine,” Zelda said. “Forget it. I’ve got to go.”

“You’re not hungry?”

“No, Chip, I’m not hungry.”

In the street the local toughs were playing cricket in the half-light. Milton’s old apartment–right across the street–seemed foreign, lit wrong. She finally realized the streetlight was out.

“Milton still live there?” Chip asked.

“No,” she said. “He’s in Mount Washington now.”

“You guys fucking yet?”

“No, Chip, we’re not fucking yet.”

“Yet,” Chip said. “Can I walk you to your car?”

“No,” she said.

“Caught!” one of the toughs shouted and another laughingly tripped and rolled. “He’s fucking caught!”

She hadn't been up here since Milton moved out a few months after she did. All the low-slung apartments stretching back from the street seemed smaller than she remembered, as if she had lived here when she was a child. A car in front of Chip's place was booted. Across the street some drunk hipster girls were sharing a set of headphones on the porch step.

"Where'd you park?" Chip said.

"I'm fine, Chip. Let's just say good night."

"Nah, it's not a safe neighborhood," he said.

"I can take care of myself."

"Bullshit!" the cricketer with the bat shouted. "Call it no ball, Ari."

"Bullshit, yeah right," the bowler said. "Put the wicket back up."

"Fuck you," the batsman said.

"I still have no idea what the rules are," Chip said.

"You should play with them."

"Yeah right. They don't like white dudes."

"No, Chip, they just don't like you."

"Are you up on Franklin?"

"Chip, I'm fine. Good night."

"Let's get a drink," Chip said.

"Chip!" Zelda shouted. The cricketers had stopped and were looking at her. The batsman held his bat up over his shoulder and was shifting from foot to foot.

Zelda turned up the street. A helicopter went over. Chip started after her and grabbed her by the wrist, "Come on, Zelda, I know you still–"

"Chip, don't fucking touch me!" Zelda shouted. She pushed him away.

"Hey, bro, is there a problem?" the batsman said.

"No problem," Chip said, looking up at the helicopter, edging away from the guy with the bat.

"Let the girl go, bro," the batsman said.

"Mind your fucking business," Zelda said.

"Hey," the batsman said, "Hey, no kind of language for–"

"For what?" Zelda shouted, turning.

"Listen, we're just trying to make sure he's not–"

"He's not fucking bothering me."

"Damn, boy, she's spicy sauce, huh?" the bowler said to Chip.

"Fuck off," Chip said. He was turning after her again. The cricket pitch was angled across the narrow street and she'd almost made it to the opposite wicket when one of the toughs said, "You always let your girl do your talking for you, pussy?"

Zelda turned for the bowler. "What?" she said. "What?"

"You heard me," he said.

"Simmer down," the batsman said.

"I'm not his girl," Zelda said.

"Lucky him," the bowler said. Chip was up on the opposite curb by now. She flipped a bird over her shoulder and was just about back across the dashed line when the batsman muttered, "Yeah, simmer down, cunt."

He was an easy three steps away. She wanted to hit him right in the nose but instead she just slapped him. "Oooooh," said his friends. The batsman looked shocked for a minute, and Zelda was already moving away, tucking her chin, when he said, "You hit like a fucking girl."

Zelda didn't know karate. She'd been the scrappy girl on the dirt lot in high school, tussling mostly when the bullies took to Jenny, Jenny with pink hair, Jenny who cut class to draw horses and dinosaurs and skinny boys with swords on their shoulder, Jenny who let the older girls get their shots in, who didn't fight back, because, "What's the point, Zelda? They're bigger than me. They'll always win." Zelda those days was like a DDT'd egg, needing only the least excess pressure. She had hackles raised whenever the southside girls stalked the lot to where Jenny and her friends, spaced out on sixteenth-tabs of acid, did their watercolors. Zelda's friends were burnouts too, but they had mohawks, temples shaved, they looked fearsome, they only did acid after dark. This was back in '90s Kent, Jenny didn't seem like she came from '90s Kent at all, too quiet, too kind. Their mom had been trying to save up for the arts school in Squire Park but their mom was drinking again. One of the '90s Kent girls broke Zelda's jaw with a cinderblock once, junior year. Of course, Zelda was a '90s Kent girl too, she'd gotten her punches in, but she never broke anybody's jaw with a cinderblock.

She didn't break anybody's jaw that night in Los Feliz either, but she did open with a sloppy right jab to the back of the batsman's skull. He didn't go down but he did turn and stumble and his friends had to keep him up. "What the..." somebody was saying and she couldn't remember, afterwards, if she had been shouting or not. At first the toughs were in awe or afraid to hit back but after she got one in the nose–blood in a soft spatter over his moustache and her knuckles–they tried to grab her by the arms. She'd been working a lot so she was

stronger than she looked, and she looked pretty strong. Maybe the toughs didn't hit girls or maybe they only hit shrinking violets. The other team had Chip on the ground. The bowler was rearing back for a kick and the others were starting to shout. A headlight caught the narrow faces of the hipster girls, looking up from their phones, Zelda shouting, "Hey! Hey!" and Chip on the ground, someone saying, "Get up, pussy, get up," one of them helping Chip to his feet so the bowler braced and hit him in the face again, and again. One tried for a hold but Zelda broke loose, kicked him in the shins, somebody got her by the hair but she threw him off, she was wild, she was claws out until the double-squawk from the LAPD cruiser froze everybody but the deep covers, who took off towards Hollywood Boulevard. A cop went after them. The sirens were an afterthought, as was the floodlight, as was the backup. They ran out of handcuffs so they zip-tied her to the brokenlamp lightpole in front of Milton's apartment. The hipster girls were still on the step, still sharing headphones. She wondered what they were listening to and the cops took four or five of the guys in one van, scared the other ones back inside.

"Can I go?" Zelda said when they were gone. The side of her face felt fucked up. Three cops stayed behind to watch her, all dudes, which made her proud.

"No, you can't go," a cop said. "Womens' van is on the way. Sit tight, babe."

"Don't call me babe," she said.

"Don't tell us what to do, babe."

Halfway to downtown the adrenaline had worn off. She was in the back of the van, still ziptied. None of the other girls were talking. She was the only white girl because the cops don't usually arrest white girls in L.A. They drove down Sunset, it was Friday night, at 4100 Bar there was a

line, she couldn't see who was playing at the Silver Lake Lounge, they picked up a homeless woman at Echo Park Lake who couldn't keep her eyes open. The light was going down.

She'd shot just across the street from the Twin Towers a few months earlier, before she went to India. It had been another Tyke Myson movie–*Tyke Myson and the Big Clown Puzzle* or something. Milton'd told her it was the biggest jail in the world, he'd read about it, 18,000 people. "There are eighteen thousand people in Hermosa Beach," Milton said. "But probably the demographics are a bit different down there than in there." They were shooting in the Water Tower, fourth floor, and through the window the jail towered up over Glendale and the mountains, vertical slits glowing like balistraria. He wasn't afraid of jails yet, so on lunch they hiked across the parking lot to the guard entrance to get a better view. He said it wasn't just the biggest jail in the world, but the biggest mental hospital in the country.

"You don't want to see it from any closer, trust me," the guard in the parking lot said. "Now get out of here."

She had imagined it would be all women on the womens' side, but in Intake there were a few male guards wandering around, buzzcuts, looking fierce, always at the edge of growling. The walls were clean and white except for where girls had gone insane and scratched off the paint like wolverines marking territory. The JMET psychologists asked her if she was on any medication.

"The pill," she said.

"Anything else? Antidepressants?"

"No," she said.

"No Prozac?"

“I know what antidepressants are.”

“You sure?”

Once they got her in the holding cell it was lockdown until 1:30. She had no idea what time it was, she had a good sense of direction but in the winding of stairwells and elevators and processing rooms and security checks she’d lost track of north, she’d lost track of altitude, she was somewhere within a bounding box ten miles on a side and centered roughly on downtown Los Angeles. There were no windows. There were about thirty women in there. Some were sleeping and some were standing in the corners, trying not to touch anything. One of the girls from the van–she looked sixteen, maybe, but wouldn’t they have taken her somewhere else if that were true?–had been shepherded the same, wound up in her tank, was getting more and more tweaky, she was blinking a lot, she was tripping on her own ankles.

“What’s your name?” Zelda said.

“Rocky,” the girl said.

“What’d you do?”

“Nothing,” Rocky said. She was looking at the concrete ceiling, the square of the mercury-vapor light, as if she could claw her way through it, find the cable tunnel, follow it out. They sat there for hours. When the lockdown lifted one by one the women disappeared at the call of a name, Sheriff’s Deputy hand on her hip, dulled stare, voice toneless and practiced–exhausted. “Esmerelda Martinez.” “JoJo Knox.” “Janet Freeman.” Janet was young, too, she looked tired, and when she caught Zelda staring she said, “Don’t look at me bitch.” Then she was gone, and others came to replace her. Only Rocky sat near Zelda, she was shaking, she started to mumble.

"You better get her to stop freakin' the fuck out," an older woman said. "She'll end up a yellow shirt."

"What's a yellow shirt?" Zelda said.

"They make the crazy ones wear yellow shirts," the woman said. "So you know they're crazy."

"She's not crazy," Zelda said. "She's just scared."

"Sweetie," the woman said, "you don't know a damn thing about that girl."

Rocky was rolling back and forth. Zelda rubbed her arms. "You'll be alright," Zelda said. "You can call someone soon."

"I don't have anybody to call," Rocky said, and she shivered to sleep on the concrete bench. When they called Zelda she wanted to wake Rocky up, to tell her it was going to be okay, but the girl started at her touch and curled deeper into the corner.

"Hurry it up," the Deputy said.

In the dressing rooms all the women were looking down. Deputies went through their clothes piece by piece, checking for hidden pockets. One woman was shrieking, naked, two guards had her by the arms and were pressing her to the floor so another could get the handcuffs back on her. "Don't touch me!" she was screaming. "Don't touch me!" They held her on the ground while Zelda's Deputy walked her into a stall, said, "Please remove your clothing, including your underwear."

"Is this really necessary?" Zelda said. "Can't I call for bail–"

"Please remove your clothing, including your underwear," the Deputy said.

"When do I get to call someone?" Zelda said.

“Please remove your clothing, including your underwear,” the Deputy said.

“Don’t touch me! Jesus don’t touch me, please, don’t touch me!”

As Zelda stripped–what had she been thinking, earlier today, when she’d put on a lace balconette, striated turquoise and teal, boy shorts with little yellow ducks on them, where had that day that she’d prepared for gone?–the screaming woman quieted down. They got her to her feet. When she went at one of them with her teeth the guard slapped her in the face. “Go,” the guard said to the others, removing a torn nitrile glove. “We got a naked dyke walking!” she shouted. “Walk her. Hey, ladies! We got a naked dyke walking!” They muscled the woman–screaming again, naked, feet struggling for purchase against the white floors–into the corridor, where the guards shouted, again, “Naked dyke walking! Naked dyke walking!”

Zelda had her hand on the clasp of her bra. She was staring.

“Please remove your clothing, including your underwear,” the Deputy said.

They didn’t dress Zelda in orange, like she had imagined–they asked her, first, if she was a lesbian.

“Uhhh...” Zelda said.

“Are you or aren’t you?”

“I’m not,” Zelda said.

“Put these on, then,” they said.

It wasn’t a jumpsuit, either, but sweatpants and a dark blue shirt. She found out later, from a girl in the general-purpose holding cell where they kept her for the next six hours, that lesbians get light blue.

"Why do they separate the lesbians?" she asked.

"So they don't get raped, I guess," the girl said. "They get raped anyway though."

She had, for the first few hours, a kind of documentarian's curiosity about the place. She wore her face stern but she looked at everyone closely, when they walked her from the changing rooms down long corridors scalloped with cells she looked into each one to see women sleeping six, ten to a room, some on the floor, some pacing by the door, some on the toilet, some matching perfectly the turning passage of Zelda's eyes, but she could not fix anything like a named emotion to any expression. There was a smell in the air like witchhazel, like lurk of bile, muted out. When they put her in the next holding cell they clicked the door closed and said, "Lockdown until 5:30." She kept standing in the corner until a girl said, "Listen, white girl, you're gonna get tired if you stand there all night. Sit down."

"I'm fine," Zelda said.

"Suit yourself," the girl said.

And the girl was right–as the hours of the night turned, and Zelda did not know they turned, or how they turned, but her veil of inquiry withered, her stomach dropped out from under her, she began to worry she were not some outside observer brought to a place that did not belong to her but that she had, finally, gotten into something over her head. The girls in her cell were quiet, they spoke in murmurs if they spoke.

"What's your name?" the girl asked her, finally. She looked like, once, she might have had perfect eyebrows, beautiful earrings, she had a slim nose and deep, Indian skin like she were from Chiapas or farther. Now she was not frowning, but the furrows of her time showed at her lips, in the angles of her perfect jawline, the veins in the thin tissue of her neck.

"Zelda," she said.

"Like the video game?" the girl said.

"Yeah," Zelda said. "Not after it, but like it."

"Never met a Zelda in here," the girl said.

"What's your name?"

"You don't have to know my name," the girl said. "You'll be outta here soon."

"They haven't let me call anybody."

"You watch too many movies," the girl said. "They'll take you downstairs soon. You've probably already got a friend waiting for you."

"Nobody knows I'm in here."

"Somebody knows," the girl said. "What'd you do?"

"I got in a fight."

"Ooooh," the girl said. "What'd the bitch do?"

"It was some guys, actually."

"You win?"

"The cops broke it up."

"Your bruise looks nice. You sure it wasn't your boyfriend?"

"No, it wasn't my boyfriend."

"Okay, sweetie," the girl said.

"What'd you do?" Zelda said.

"Well, this time they got me with no driver's license."

"You go to jail for that?"

"You go to jail for that if you're Mexican and if you're on parole."

"I'm sorry," Zelda said.

"Not your fault."

"How old are you?"

"I'm nineteen," the girl said.

"Where you from?"

"I told you, I'm Mexican," she said.

"No, I mean, where do you live."

"Boyle Heights," she said.

"I like Boyle Heights. It's funky. I work there sometimes."

"You work in Boyle Heights, sometimes?"

"I work in The Movies."

"Oh," the girl said. "Well, sweetie, you might have *worked* in Boyle Heights, but you've never seen Boyle Heights, okay?"

"Okay," Zelda said.

"Just like, well...this place is a little worse than Boyle Heights," she said, laughing, "but you know, you're gonna get out of here, you're gonna have stories to tell, but listen. You've been here, maybe, but you haven't seen this place. You haven't seen this place at all, this is the easy part, this is the edge of the pit, girl. You haven't seen anything." The girl closed her eyes and leaned back against the wall. "Good night, Zelda from videogames," she said. "Get some sleep. You'll be outta here soon."

Zelda never got to sleep. She stayed standing for as long as she could. In the hallways all night long people wailed and were dragged. "You glad you got these colors, Lezzie McGuire?" a guard said. A form passed beyond the door, this one not even struggling. "You happy now?" Sometimes the doors to the mental wards opened in just the right sequence and like an interior wind screams passed. It sounded like people were being tortured in the far distance, keens and whines too quiet to rattle anything but the skull. Zelda wedged herself into the corner and watched through the window the mad on their chains, pulled back and forth through the dark. Her legs were close to giving out but she didn't want to sit down. When they served breakfast through the slot she took two sips from the milk and put it back on the tray.

"Eat," the girl said from over her cheese sandwich.

"I'm not hungry," Zelda said. By then she was getting a little shaky. She stood at the door, staring out into the panopticon. "Hey!" she shouted to one of the guards.

"Zelda, girl, don't do that," the girl said. "Just sit down and eat."

"Hey!" she shouted again.

"Shut up," the girl said.

"I'm kind of freaking out," Zelda said through the slot. "I'm kind of freaking out."

"What?" one of the guards said.

"I want to call somebody," she said.

"Shut up," the guard said.

"Zelda, shut up," the girl said. Zelda felt her jaw sticking and she chewed it in the air until it popped. Her wrists were tingling. She felt like she could pull out all of her hair.

"Let me talk to somebody," she said.

“You better quiet down,” the guard shouted at her.

“Let me talk to somebody,” she said. “I think I’m freaking out.”

“Okay,” the guard said, and threw the bolt. She was faster than Zelda had figured. She bounded in and grabbed Zelda by her dark blue shirt and she pushed her up against the wall. She had a fist cocked.

“You need to stop whining like a little bitch, okay? Shut the fuck up. Stop whining, okay little bitch?”

Zelda’s arms hung at her side. Her fingers didn’t clench. She wasn’t looking at anything. When the guard let go she drooped to the floor. The girl held up the carton of milk and Zelda sat and sipped at it. The girl had Zelda’s head in her hands. She stroked her hair. “That wasn’t that bad,” the girl said. “See, just chill out. Just chill. You didn’t get hit, okay? You’re all right. You don’t want the yellow shirt, girl, just chill.” Zelda couldn’t get her eyes to focus on anything.

Through the glass, the guard stood back from the cell, looked around. At the command dais at the center of the panopticon, another Deputy–older, more copper on her uniform, called the guard over. They spoke for a little while and the guard looked at her boots. She came back over–slowly, not making eye contact, and this time she knocked on the door.

“Come in,” one of the other women said cheerfully.

The guard motioned to Zelda and said, “Well, ladies, I just...I want to apologize for the language I used back there. That was really totally inappropriate, that kind of language. Very inappropriate. Uh. Please accept my apology.” The guard turned and left. The supervisor watched from the dais.

Zelda was shaking.

“That’s a new one,” one woman said, after a long time. “Guess they don’t get away with talking shit to pretty white girls from The Movies, huh?”

“Leave her alone,” the girl said.

“Just saying,” the woman said. “You ever seen ‘em pull a punch like that? Same shit everywhere.”

“Leave her alone,” the girl said.

“She’ll be alright,” the woman said.

“Here,” the girl said. “Drink. You’ll be outta here soon. You’ll be okay.” Cradled in the girl’s lap, Zelda finally slept.

Milton was in the lobby when they released her on bail a few hours later. “How’d you know?” she said.

“Chip called me from jail.”

“He called *you?”*

“Told me to come get you. They took him up to Valencia. He said he’s got a lawyer.”

“Do I have to sign anything?” Zelda said.

“I got your bail,” he said.

“Was it a lot?”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “We’ll figure it out later.”

Heading back up Sunset all the light seemed off. She kept craning to look at the sky, she thought the color temperature was wrong. At her place up in Echo Park the roosters were losing

it even though it must have been near noon. "Want me to strangle them so you can get some sleep?" he said. She laughed, once.

"You alright?" he said.

"Yeah," she said. "Just want to take a shower."

"Well," he said. "Call me if you need anything."

"Milton," she said. She stood in the frame of the door, equidistant from the paintrotten casing, as though repelled by the poles of hidden magnets. She vibrated in space.

"Yeah?"

"Don't tell anybody," she said.

"You kidding? They'll idolize you for this, even more than they already do. Zelda the badass takes down a whole cricket team, fights the power from on the inside."

"Just don't tell anybody," she said. She closed the door behind her.

In Daramshala there had been a few sick kids in the streets, but just a few. Coming down from the temple she had already forgotten the Dalai Lama's punchlines and was not immune to considering this a vast karmic transgression. The flight out wasn't for an hour or two and the rest of the crew–the director and the producer–were off trying to sell the sound equipment they'd bought in Delhi. The color was orange even with the altitude. The peaks and crests of the roofs fell away south. The cedars, when she stood to listen, creaked and murmured. She worried she had missed something, but then she left.

Inrushing Energies

Annika remembered–in the linened light by which others remember the morning of their first childhood voyage to distant continents, or the first dawn mass under whatever savior's star–the dark lit suddenly by the big screen up front. It showed a beautiful planet nested in the ellipses of its moons, and one long hyperbola coming in from the top of the diagram, blinking blue. She remembered–or she thought she remembered, the flash of memory so imprecise, so corruptible after-the-fact, so that photographs inserted themselves into the years, so that old stories told wrong became true–the smeared sheen of the cityshine on the hydrazine tanks as they drove to the laboratory. She remembered her cruel sister's parkinglot grumble as they mothered each other into undersize jackets. She remembered being cold but Altadena never got that cold. In the rocketgarden across the road the spacecraft were dewglittered.

She remember pondering distances unponderable even to sages, and she had been, what, ten, eleven, twelve? then and bright for her age but never so bright as her sister, or her mother.

Of all of it, though, the memory most etched, the lone recalled flash undulled by whatever failures or compromises with her best nature it were that finally grew her the fuck up, was the look on her face even to a child not so simple a look as pride but a look like she were master to whole bodies of knowledge never before conceived–a look Annika only ever elsewhere

encounted in imitation, painted in alcoves dedicated to saints receiving the vision or sailors cast onto the rocks by the storm. She never saw such an expression again.

Her twin sister, beside her in the control room, was asking if she could have more peanuts–they celebrated spacecraft milestones with peanuts–but Annika could not move or speak or even take her kind father's hand, where he stood apart. She watched her mother for a long time, still, smiling vaguely, but calm with mysteries unriddled, until everyone bursts into cheers when telemetry confirmed that the Galileo space probe, after seven years, two months, and ten days crossing void undescribed by matter or warmth, had completed its insertion burn into the orbit of Jupiter.

She was unprepared to think of her mother's expression anywhere but especially that night, in Detroit, of all places.

"I swear, I'm going to strangle the local hire who pitched this as the best jukebox in southeast Michigan," Zelda said.

Annika'd been back in L.A. for a year. She'd moved to Silver Lake. She'd fallen into costuming. She'd fallen out of love with Milton and then into her mother's spare bedroom up in Altadena.

Detroit was her first real out-of-town gig, she was nervous, she was heady with the glancing air of success afforded even by exit-row tickets from LAX to DWI connecting through Miami. The producer was new-shoes with too much money and too little sense to know you can get capable technicians into Detroit way cheaper than flying them all the way from California, but then, there was the assumption of quality–and we want only the best, the producer had told her over bad Turkish coffee at Casbah before he spiked her the tab, for *Surfin' Liễu-S-A*, the

brave, unlikely story of two big-vision Vietnamese kids from suburban Michigan who just want to surf, man! (The kids, in a significant subplot, stole surfboards from a cranky had-been's oakpaneled garage, and they took them down to the Detroit River to ride the wakes off ore haulers and the Coast Guard gunboats keeping everyone from escaping to Canada.) Annika's most significant professional obstacles, so far, was that the female lead was 5'2" and 92 pounds when hungover, so she had to buy a serger from a pawn shop in Greektown to hem in all the waistlines she'd cut.

"Make sure they fuckin' comp you," Zelda was saying. "Keep receipts. Keep every receipt, ever."

"Didn't they give you her dimensions?" Milton said. "Aren't the girls supposed to put that on headshots?"

"She's lost some weight, I guess," Annika said. "I'm a little worried about her, honestly."

"Oh honey," Zelda said. "Accept early and often that she and all her peers are doomed. Detach yourself from it. Foster an attitude of benign neglect towards the fate of women in our industry, or face constant despair."

"She'll have another," Milton said, waving a round for Zelda.

Annika still found it hard to get a word in, had to guard herself against jealousy and suspicion–he wasn't hers and he'd been an inconstant lover anyway, she was over him, he and Zelda were corrosive enough to be perfect for each other, but then Milton sloppily and with a certain undeniably appealing fatalism kissed the edge of Annika's collarbone in the hotel elevator. Zelda, to her credit, politely turned away and pretended to find something fascinating in the elevator safety certificate, Look at that two years expired! Zelda was after the Best Boy,

anyway, who was a girl, and whose back-of-the-calf tattoo of the Morton Salt girl Zelda found wildly erotic.

"Is that weird?" Zelda was saying in the elevator.

"My sister's bisexual," Annika said.

"I'm not bisexual," Zelda said. "I just also like girls."

"Um," Annika said.

"Zelda's not into your definitions, man," Milton said with the doors.

So they stumbled–Milton and Zelda, anyway, Annika was better at least at pretending to keep her liquor–down the hallways of the lavish hotel casino the State of Michigan had spent so much film stimulus money to quarter them in. The bellboys bowed after them like they were young royalty–and their upperfloor suites, that they even now tumbled into, were bedecked with velvet furniture, buckling under the weight of camera cases, collapsed costume racks, SCUBA gear.

The morning ritual, now three nights worn, would be to retrace the night's romance by the position and state of garments scattered around the suite, not just pushup bras and hiking socks sweatcaked to cardboard, but their belts, bags, the weird kit they all accrued like commandos–Annika's bandolier was getting respectable, studded with all of her expert notions, a dozen needle pallettes, spools of comprehensive shade and gauge, half-dozen pairs of sewing scissors, square tailor's chalk, pocket protectors with seam gauges instead of slide rules, now tossed carelessly over the window ottoman. But that was for the morning to unravel. They didn't worry about turning up the music too loud because they were the only ones in the hotel. "I was looking for a job and then I got a job," Zelda shouted from the balcony, "and Heaven knows

I'm miserable now!" They didn't worry, when their bottles drained, about putting further demilitres of cognac and champagne on the room service, because the State of Michigan was footing the tabs. This was September 2009. Elsewhere in the country the bottom had dropped out and people were losing their homes. In Detroit, things got worse–but you had to be an expert on the particulars of ruin to know the difference. Annika, Milton, Zelda–anyone from L.A., really–were hardly experts on anything but the play of the light on the fabric's pigment.

They drank on the balcony looking out over the sterile and abandoned heart of the last great American metropolis. Zelda was slurring her threats to sneak up to the Morton Salt girl's room. Milton ordered more. When the cork impulsed off into the dark the pop and their music and laughter rattled in the windows of shuttered apartment towers and bothered no one.

The fourth day they were out on Belle Isle and they had a boat, a little zodiac one of the local hires rented from up in Grosse Pointe. In the film the surf kids had stolen it from a cousin or something, were using it to play chicken with the Coast Guard because fuck you, man, but then they beached it to try to catch some waves. The director seemed to be using some imaginary script cobbled together in mind only from the half-dozen drafts he was constantly shuffling. The script supervisor had given up hope and was working on her tan.

Thursday and Friday the beach had been deserted, but now Saturday brimmed with all the resting devout of the city–mostly black, because even in collapsing American cities the banks will still give home loans to white people. For those left the Detroit River was like a riviera, parasols in blue and green, sandcastles, men towed smokers out onto the beach so the afternoon went gauzy and gold with pigsmoke, and the younger kids came around to watch the sleepy film

crew and Milton and Zelda in their dive gear out in the water and the camera in a big polycarbonate housing and the two Vietnamese kids on surfboards sitting there waiting for swells that would never come. Annika, actually, was rather enjoying herself. Once she wedged the actress into her wetsuit–nobody in Detroit had wetsuits that small so she'd had to get a child's medium shipped special from a dive shop in Windsor–she had little to do. She and the makeup girls sat in camp chairs looking out over the water and some of the kids came over every so often and said, "What are they *doing?!*" when the divers broke the water or the actress fell off her surfboard. Annika smiled, but the older locals kept their distance, observed with a casual suspicion, laughed a little when Zelda came frogstepping up the beach in her flippers cursing under her breath to dig through Milton's kit bag. "Everything okay?" Annika said.

"He dropped his tape measure. The bottom is all ooze. I swear it's like that oil shit from The X-Files down there. I hate this job." Zelda took the spare underwater tape–pink plastic, from the local dive shop–and waddled back down.

One of the kids had been taking the better part of twenty minutes to edge closer and closer to the film crew, eyeing the big jib the grips were assembling down by the water. Finally he wound up sitting in the sand next to her, and she was shy around strangers even if six, so he broke the ice eventually by saying, "What's your movie about?"

"Well," Annika said. "The two people on surfboards are from Detroit, and they want to surf."

"In the river? There's no waves."

"Yeah. They want to move to California."

"Oh," the kid said. "Are you from California?"

“I am,” she said. “Have you ever been to California?”

“Disneyland,” the kid said. “It was alright.”

“What grade are you in?”

“I’ll be in fifth grade this year.”

“Do you like your teacher?”

“It’s still summer,” the kid said. It took Annika a few seconds to work out his meaning, her sense of time and season so skewed by the freelancer’s weird epochs (epoch, a word she used from her mother’s language, a point in time to fix the turn of planets against), that California fire-season rain-season cycle she’d been measuring buy. Her last notion of summer, like the kid’s summer, boundless atemporal summer down by the water, had been that last Ivy League summer, her father having just left the sciences, her father having just rediscovered the Angel Moroni, her father having just moved back to Salt Lake–she’d helped him build the greenhouse and when summer thunderstorm forced her inside she’d struggled fruitlessly to memorize the various mutations that could prevent transcription of the Forkhead Box Protein *FOXP2*, and so fry the language centers of the human brain.

“I like movies,” the kid was saying. “When can I watch this one?”

“Well,” Annika said. “It’s...it probably won’t come out in theaters, you know.”

“So what’s it for?” he said.

“Well,” Annika said. “I’m not sure, I guess. What’s your favorite movie?”

“I dunno,” the kid said. “Samurai movies.”

“Really?”

“Yeah I like when they have swordfights. It’s cool.”

"Is he bothering you, miss?" the kid's mom said, walking over.

"No, not at all," Annika said.

"Come on, Sampson," she said.

"Talk to you later," the kid said, and Annika watched after him goosestepping in the hot sand out past whatever invisible perimeter it was that separated her from them, kept her with her kind, the script girl was down to her bikini and the grips were moving the jib suspiciously closer, Milton or Zelda or the cinematographer or the safety diver twenty yards out and breaking the surface every so often around the actress who paddled back and forth on her surfboard, light gleaming on the Renaissance Center towers beyond where nothing seemed to move or alter. On the island in the river society seemed still held together by something recognizable, wholly vital– the children, and their parents, were smiling in the sun. No sound from the city–no industry or gunshot or siren–labored out to them across the water. The AD called the day and Milton and Zelda came waddling up the beach. "I'm trying not to think about how much sewer effluent we're diving in."

"Shut the fuck up," Milton said, tearing his goggles from his eyes. She took a picture of him on her disposable, holding his plastic pink tapemeasure, half-emerged from his dive gear, looking disconsolate.

Wrapping that afternoon, Annika precisely folded her costumes and ratcheted her rolling racks into the truck she shared with the electrics. She giggled and joked–the Best Boy was leaning against the lift gate, eyebrows raised as Zelda tried to flirt with her–because here they were, flown out from Los Angeles at no small expense, and Detroit was maybe not Paris but it was better than Lancaster. Zelda had shot in India in the spring. Milton said he might be going

to Germany. Annika had never left L.A. for work before but a designer she knew was promising to take her to Belize next year. They were all surely on the way up. Everyone grinned, and the young local hires pressed creased business cards into their hands.

But she kept catching herself looking back up the beach where the kid ran in wild circles, inscribing patterns, glyphs in the sand, orbital paths, even–forever inexplicable, to her, silent in that silent, collapsed city that she saw as collapsed surely but still so vital and thriving.

“It’s jobs,” Zelda said.

“Jobs for us. Jobs for white kids from twenty five hundred miles away.”

They were on the balcony again–they seemed always to be on a balcony. Annika was looking out over the gridded casino lot to the blue-to-green beacons lining Canada on the far side of the river. Milton and Zelda were arguing about film incentives but Annika had lost faith in argument.

“Don’t you think?” Milton said to her.

“Don’t drag her into this,” Zelda said. “She’s a responsible young woman and doesn’t mix politics and alcohol.”

Annika tipped her beer at that.

“It’s a racket,” Milton said. “We’re not even paying for this cognac.”

“You never pay for your drinks,” Annika said dreamily.

“That’s below the belt.”

"You never pay to get your car out of impound," she said. "But I don't mind. You know, it's because we have money that my mom is a rocket scientist. She has a certain lifestyle to be maintained. Did you know that?"

"I didn't know that," Zelda said. "Since when do you drink cognac anyway, Milton?"

"There's Hennessey ads everywhere," Milton said.

"Colt 45," Annika said, doing her best Lando Calrissian impression. "Works every time." She snapped her fingers.

"Your girlfriend's drunk," Zelda said.

"I'm not his girlfriend," Annika said. "We're lovers. I'm his rich older woman and we're lovers on holiday."

"Roll higher next time honey," Zelda said. "Try for Cabo at least."

"I don't mind paying for his lifestyle," Annika said. "His fast car is always in impound and it seems like such a tragedy to leave it there, don't you think, darling? I used to love when he would drive me up the coast, darling."

"Who's 'darling' here?" Zelda said.

"You are, darling," Annika said.

"Milton, your girlfriend is flirting with me."

"My sister would like you, Zelda. She's bisexual, you know."

"You're cut off," Milton said.

"That's for the State of Michigan to decide," Annika said.

"Jesus it ought to be illegal," Milton said. "They're insolvent and they're keeping us tits-deep in liquor."

"So don't cash the fucking check," Zelda said.

"Let's not get carried away," he said, and Annika handed him another bottle. He removed the foil and gave it back to her, and she fired the cork off into the empty electric night, laughing.

In the morning she woke before him. She was too young, still, to get headaches. She ironed the day's costumes–tweed quarter jacket for the brother, weird plaid woven skirt for the sister, because in the scene they were going to visit their traditionalist Vietnamese grandmother, who was going to tell them about the Old Country. Zelda stumbled from her bedroom and the Best Boy vanished into the hallway.

"Sleep well?" Annika said.

"You're too cute to be sarcastic," Zelda said. "Jesus, is there a coffee maker in here?"

Annika was silent. She had the serger on the coffee table and she whirled it up to speed to turn out the tear in the skirt's hem. Zelda banged in the kitchen for a while before she came and fell onto the couch.

"It's the same mechanism, you know," Zelda said, watching Annika feed the fabric into the skittering machine. "As a film camera. Pretty much the same machine, just a pin going up and down and a claw pulling to the side."

"I remember," Annika said. "I used to be a cameragirl, remember?"

"Oh right," Zelda said. "I forget. Anyway, they work like that." She was just short of frowning.

"I joke and tell my mom that sewing is more complicated than space travel, and she makes fun of me, but she can't knit a stitch."

“That’s funny,” Zelda said.

“My dad taught me,” Annika said. “His mom died, so he had to sew for his sisters.”

“Gender studies,” Zelda said.

“What’s it called again, the working gear of the camera?”

“A motion,” Zelda said. “The mechanism that advances the film. It moves just like that.”

“Knitting with light.”

“You’ve got it exactly,” Zelda said.

“Thanks,” Annika said.

“All the boys in our business go on and on–even Milton, has he given his ‘cameras are cars’ bullshit? They all go on and on comparing cameras to guns, cameras to cars. It makes them feel tough, I guess. But they’re not the same. Guns are...whatever the chemical is, nitrocellulose? Cars are chemistry. More than anything.”

“There’s chemistry in the film, though,” Annika said, not looking up as she finely merrowed the edge of the cut and purled it closed.

“For now,” Zelda said. “RED wants it to be all silicon soon. Fuckers.”

“Silicon, glass plates, silver halogen–”

“Silver halide,” Zelda said.

“Whatever,” Annika said. “Chemistry in everything, my mom likes to say.”

“I guess she’s right.”

“She’s a chemist, so.”

“I thought she was a rocket scientist.”

“Rockets are mostly chemistry too.”

They were silent in the small dark hotel living room, and the only light was from the gauze over the gap in the curtains that played pearl over the wall and the entryway. The serger clicked and throbbed and Zelda watched Annika work her hands over the material.

"You still in love with Milton?" Zelda said.

"Sure," Annika said. "Mildly. If he were three inches taller, I'd be in trouble."

"Be careful," Zelda said.

"Don't worry about him," Annika said. "I'm no good at breaking hearts."

"I meant be careful with yourself. I mean, he's faithful, in his way. I love him. But he's..."

"Zelda," Annika said. "I know a lot more about him than you do."

"I didn't mean that. He disappears."

"I know."

"He's always disappearing."

"I know, Zelda. I'm the one who gives him the money."

"Well, he helps me out, you know. When my car gets towed."

"No, Zelda, I help you out, when your car gets towed. He borrows from me to loan to you."

"So why's he offer to help?"

"Because you're the one he hides it from."

"Hides what from?"

Annika gritted her teeth and leaned close to the material–bad form here, she knew, if the needle binds you can be blinded–and she turned the switch off and the machine chattered silent. She ran her finger over the hem.

"Well, just be careful you don't get–"

"Zelda," Annika said. "We're not all shrinking violets who aren't noisy." She lifted the shirt and the jacket from the table and she left.

That morning they were shooting down in the abandoned districts. On the way in they passed a cage of inward-facing billboards, for Hennessey, for Colt 45 (Billy Dee Williams, with a girl in big shoulders cooing over his clipped gray suit, was saying, "It works every time!") They shot in the front yards of houses burned to the ground by madmen or apocalyptic revelers or poor adherence to electrical code. Annika, through implied romance with Milton, Zelda, or both, started sitting on the camera dolly and the grips clucked at her, offered her water, beer, assistant with anything she might need, because the grips were always jealous of whatever the camerapeople had. What the camerapeople had that day was a peculiar agency, everyone above them in the chain of command absent or baffled by the wasteland, so Milton led them wandering the streets, who knows what they were supposed to be shooting–the script supervisor was working on her own screenplay in the van, the producer was in Canada trying to wrangle a wave machine. "I can't believe this is America," one of the grips said. "I never thought I'd see shit like this in America. You know, the city's talking about sending demolition squads to flatten what's left of East Detroit? Not much left, I'd say."

A woman on her porch was watching them. When Milton swung the camera on his shoulder to frame her for the shot she went inside. Nobody knew what to do–the scne with the grandmother seemed to have been entirely abandoned, the actress was walking down the sidewalk like she were a tour guide, the whole crew stalked the sidewalks after her with the local hires creeping the vans up after them. Like a weird documentary crew complete with wardrobe, Annika with the actress' sweater over her arm because the film was set in winter, the director muttering at the true artifact his had bad screenplay had been trying to evoke, free of metaphor, Detroit, *East* Detroit, and they had a camera. Milton had always been trained best for B Camera, and so he got the shots–neighborhoods given up to the weeds, grown-over, forgotten, houses all around them built once, presumably, by craftsmen, but now just tottering on the edge of something nothing that their training or experience in something closely approximating the ragged edges of Hollywood had prepared them to confront or capture, destruction, desolation, it was urban blight, that they'd seen before and even in L.A., but that had never seemed otherwise so pure and true, so unmasked, so obvious, and what did they know to do but point the camera at it? The film chattered through the magazines. They thought they saw something and once the shooting day was over they'd go back to their casino hotel, get drunk, have love affairs, convince themselves they understood anything like the vast yawn of a city slipping into the mantle.

They didn't talk to anybody. They just shot, four thousand feet, barely speaking. They felt good about themselves and their penchant for sight, for vision, for framing the shot.

Then the assistant director pulled up in a passvan and stuck his head out the window and said, "Chop chop!"

Back out on Belle Isle, Sampson found his way over to her within the hour. He didn't say much, and she could not think of a way to force the conversation. Out in the river the zodiac was whipping around, bucking against the water wild with Milton and Zelda tied into the gunwales and the actress on the prow looking stern as a whaler with the harpoon ready. The safety diver had quiet and the local hire on the outboard was laughing hysterically as they roared upriver. The script girl was asking one of the grips to reapply the lotion.

"What grade are you in?" Sampson said finally.

"I'm not in school anymore," she said.

"I know, but. How old are you?"

"Twenty-five."

"I'm ten," he said.

"Oh," she said. "What's your favorite subject in school?"

"Space stuff," he said. "I liked when they were telling us about Saturn. Did you know how many moons it has?"

"How many?" Annika asked.

"Twenty-six, maybe more," Sampson said. "A lot."

"I didn't know that," Annika said. "Do you know what my mom does for work?"

"What?" Sampson said.

"She builds spaceships," Annika said.

"Yeah right," Sampson said. He was quiet for a while. "What do you do on this movie, anyway?"

"I do the costumes," Annika said.

"Like what the people diving are wearing?" Sampson said.

"No, they're not in the movie. They're the camera people. Like what the girl on the boat is wearing."

"She's just wearing a sweater," Sampson said.

"Well," Annika said. "What would you have her wear?"

"I don't know," Sampson said. "I don't care about that kind of stuff."

"Oh," Annika said. The motor roared and faltered, surged back, the boat was making another pass to the east.

"Did you always want to do clothes things?" Sampson said.

"Not really," Annika said. "What do you want to do when you grow up?"

"I want to be an astronaut, probably," Sampson said.

"That's a good job," Annika said.

"It's hard, but I have pretty good eyesight."

"Good," Annika said. "Are you good at math?"

"My mom's teaching me long division," he said.

They sat there for a while until Sampson wandered off. She watched him go, his mother eyeing her from afar, one of the smoker guys producing pulled pork for the kid to eat at the big table, he shook the sand from his sneakers, he had family. She'd never really considering having kids. She didn't really now. Friends was another story, but even still, Milton and Zelda were out on the water, the makeup girls didn't like her, the Best Boy was flexing for the PA down from Ann Arbor with the pink hair. Her sister had texted her the night before, saying Tiffany was a slut, saying she'd had it with art school girls. Annika thought of calling her but the light was

wrong for phone calls. She'd try to describe the sun in the glass towers across the river but she wasn't a poet, like her sister–"God, Annika, just say it's pretty and leave it at that, spare me your sophomore-year pink and blues"–but pretty was never what she was after, entirely. She didn't have the mechanics for it. She knew earth tones and the way cotton would curl into the cut, she knew the various chemistries and lingual structures of the brain's unfigured depths, but nobody ever tried to sum up a sunset with a protein, with Sapir-Worff, with a well-fit shoe. Was she after something else, or was she just wasting her time? Did she brook Milton's bullshit because he took from her, or because he offered? Was she in L.A. just to prove to her mother...whatever? She wasn't sure. She was breathing hard. The zodiac was powering around on a roostertail and all the kids were running down to the shore to watch. "Slow the fuck down!" she thought she heard Zelda yelling over the engine, but it was far off. The crew were lounging on the beach, pastel colors, sunglasses, acting easy and at peace but completely walled in, except the gaffer, who was gregarious, striking up conversations with the locals wherever they went.

"What's this movie about?" someone was asking.

"It's a mayonaise commercial," the Best Boy said, and laughed.

"What?" the local said.

"Nah, she's just joking," said the gaffer. "It's a surf movie."

"Surfing in Detroit, huh?"

"You're telling me," the gaffer said.

The man spoke quietly and he noted with a genuine interest how many people it took to make a movie, and the gaffer walked him through it, the pair of interns standing in the surf holding giant mirrored discs to get light on the boat, the sound mixer with the boom pole

mounted to her fisherman's chair, three jackets and headphones so big she might have been tracking whales–whole gaggles of others hunched over their coffee or leaning against generators (or the grips, who, when not after the script girl, were engaged in tasks indescribable by human language).

"Is that the camera? That big thing they've got out there?"

"Yeah," the gaffer said. "That a watertight housing for it, so it can get wet."

"I used to make dialysis machines. They look like that."

"What do you do now?" the gaffer said.

"I'm in agriculture, man. You know, like urban agriculture?"

"Like warehouses and stuff?" the gaffer said.

"We don't have the farmland so we use what we've got."

"Good on you, brother," the gaffer said.

"Thanks, brother." The man smiled in the afternoon. He didn't meet Annika's eyes. He laughed at the gaffer's jokes. They shook hands and the man was pointing across the river at some other city she could not and would never see, his voice lost now to the roaring outboard, look in his face not just like pride but like faith, like belief in the making of the things, confident, sure, not at all naive and yet still at peace with the arc of history because has it yet closed? Accomplishments yet unfinished but never doomed to failure. She thought maybe she was seeing everything wrong.

The zodiac made a sound like a piano dropped off a roof when it hit the seawall. Milton had already pitched over the side somewhere but for a moment she saw Zelda with her legs around the gunwale, reaching for the actress, the crowd hunching low and bearing to run. The

boat flipped fast and the sound of the motor changed, choked, whine like a bonesaw. The gaffer was running before the wreck even slowed, but no one else knew what to do. They just stared.

Nobody died but a few of the adults wound up in the hospital. One kid was bruised pretty bad where the hull knocked him down but somehow the propeller missed him. The actress broke both of her wrists and Zelda had a gash down her arm a half inch deep from trying to hold the girl against the lashing. She resisted the attentions of the EMTs for half an hour before she finally relented. The news was there. The cops were asking a lot of questions until the Coast Guard took the local hire driving the boat and the AD and the producers down to CGS Belle Isle where they had presumably a very long conversation. The script girl watched what was going on for a few minutes before she had to reapply. Milton and Zelda and the actress gave witness statements that could be summed down to, "The guy on the motor was being a fucking idiot." Annika kept looking up the beach, she walked up to the road, she checked the boat ramp where the smoker guys were hooking their trailers back to the trucks, but Sampson was gone. She was pretty sure he was okay. She hadn't seen him at the focus of any of the gangs of huddled medics. The kid who got hurt pretty bad was older. But she couldn't find him. She looked and looked and couldn't find him.

Anyway, the camera made it alright in its bughouse, so the last images recorded for *Surfin' Liễu-S-A* were of a boat jetting off into the distance and Milton's flippers hitting the lens and three minutes of a lolling, sideways vista of downtown Detroit, not altogether a bad shot with the light just perfect, until the magazine went dry.

At the hotel, Milton had been in the bathroom for five minutes with the sink running.

"The river's spooking him," Zelda said. "This isn't bad. Once in L.A. a homeless guy threw a condom at us. He lost his shit pretty hard. Burned half his stuff in an alley."

"Zelda, don't take this the wrong way, but I think I know more about it than you do."

The door opened and Milton came back out.

"You alright?" Zelda said.

"I'm fine," he said.

"You seemed better for a while," Zelda said.

"I said I'm fine."

"Let me know if I can help."

"God damn it Zelda I'm fine," he said, and he drank straight from the Rémy Martin.

"Forgive him," Zelda said to Annika. "He was raised by barbarians."

"Most boys were, in my experience," Annika said.

"Ooh, experience," Zelda said. "Do tell."

"Nothing sordid."

"Experience does not come from nothing sordid," Zelda said. "Or are you one of those...shrinking violets?"

Annika, reaching for the brut–there were four bottles of varying shapes and weights out there on the balcony–stopped, and looked at Zelda for a long time.

"What about your experience?" Annika said.

"Me? I'm just your stock tough-as-nails lesbian," Zelda said.

"I thought you were bisexual."

"Zelda's not into your definitions, man," Milton said.

"Where are you from, anyway? I don't think I ever got the whole story."

"Kent, Washington," Zelda said.

"Washington's very nice," Annika said.

"Kent's not," Zelda said.

Milton said, "Zelda's parents met when her mom sold her dad acid at a Kenny Loggins concert."

"Thanks for keeping my secret, dipshit," Zelda said. He saluted.

"My parents met at a space shuttle launch," Annika said.

They were silent for a moment.

"Well, yes, that is hard to compete with," Zelda said.

"It was *Challenger*, actually."

Milton stopped with the bottle in his hand. "I didn't know that part," he said.

Zelda looked at Annika for a moment and finally said, "Okay but what was the second date like?"

Annika smiled and said, "They're pretty normal, actually."

"Of course they are they're rocket scientists. They must be fantastically boring."

"My father is an ex-rocket scientist. He's very kind," Annika said.

"And your mom spends too much time with her head in the stars, et cetera," Zelda said.

"'She's not actually not far off,'" Annika said.

"And you not building space ships for a living is just a big fuck you to the old lady?"

"Nothing like that," Annika said. "I just wanted something more tangible, I guess. I don't have the eyes to be an astronaut and you know, the unmanned missions people, all you ever see is the pictures. The same pictures everyone else sees."

"Yeah but you made the thing that took them."

"It never seemed real to me. You're a camera person. Would you be happy, just building the machine, in..."

"They're made in Germany."

"In Germany or wherever? Would you be happy just sending your machines off into the dark? I don't know. I guess I wanted something more tactile."

"Textile, even," Milton said.

"Your girlfriend's good with her hands," Zelda said.

"I'm not his girlfriend," Annika said. "We're lovers."

"You're a strange girl, Annika," Zelda said. "Stranger than I thought."

"We're not all..." she began, and stopped. "Well."

"Yeah," Zelda said. "Don't break her heart, Milton."

"That's more up to me than to him, don't you think?"

"She's in control of her own destiny, this one," Zelda said. "I thought you liked them a little more naïve."

"Watch it," Milton said.

"He has a history, you know," Zelda said.

"Zelda," he said.

"The girl has a right–"

"Zelda," Annika said, "we all have a history. You've hurt people and I've hurt people and he's hurt people. You're not protecting me from anything. Nobody is taking advantage of me. Give me more credit."

Annika watched her–the two women, on the balcony, were both young, and in an industry of makeupped actresses neither had that look of polished porcelain or shatter-at-the-touch frailty; both vital, alive, power springing even from the tips of their fingers, each master of her own whirling machine, her own cycling motor stitch by stitch weaving out of one polymer or another something that could dazzle, excite, soothe, each enormously capable, in her way, and yet here they were, making what?–and Zelda said, "How'd you get so smart?"

"Daughter of rocket scientists," Annika said.

"All just chemistry, I guess," Zelda said.

"Of a sort."

"Diane wants me to blow off the flight back to L.A. tomorrow and drive with her to Toronto."

"Who's Diane?" Milton said.

"Morton Salt girl," Zelda said.

"Do you like her?"

"I do. She's too nice."

"Zelda has a history," Milton said.

"Milton," Zelda said.

"You won't do it," he said.

"Oh yeah? Why not?" Zelda said.

"You're afraid."

"I'm not afraid of anything," Zelda said.

"She's afraid of ever...what would you say, Zelda, afraid of exposing the slightest little opening to the knife?"

"That's not fair."

"Zelda had a boyfriend who tried to kill her."

"He didn't try to kill me."

"He tried to kill me too."

"He didn't try to kill anyone."

"Zelda stays away from nice girls and nice boys because–"

"That's enough, Milton," Zelda said.

"–because she's afraid she'll fuck 'em up–"

"Hey, it's been about five minutes, shouldn't be washing your hands by now?"

"Shouldn't you be upstairs playing with your pretend girlfriend?"

"You're an asshole," Zelda said.

"You owe me six hundred bucks," he said.

"Milton...." Zelda sucked her breath in, and turned to look out over the water, and she turned back and forced a smile.

"I think I'm going to go try to meditate, and then–"

"Do you ever knock it off with that om-ma-pad-mi-whom shit?" Milton said and Zelda made a fist to punch him but stopped the throw short and she stared at him and then slapped him in the face, and again, and left. Annika sat out there alone with him in silence for a long time,

before she went in, and she went up to her own room, and tried to sleep, but she felt lonely, the drum of the air conditioners kept her up. She lay awake in the dark, thought of Sampson's leaps and trips in the sand, the boat buckling, the crash of the door as Zelda stormed out–she threw herself from the bed and unpacked the costumes, packed them again layer by layer into her rolling cases, made sure they were tagged for the security screenings in the morning, sought out but could not find frayed seams, unpurled edges. With the fabric in her fingers she remembered, as some children remember coming up out of a chickenpox fever on their fourth birthday, or as other children remember wild thunderstorms up off Puget Sound rattling paintpeeled cabinets, the look on her mother's face, when the cheer went up. They would not get the first pictures for a few minutes but that look, even years later, told her of something surer than touch, opened her to catastrophic doubt, that she had not and would not ever find anything like what her mother had so plainly found–pride in accomplishment, maybe, or a communion greater than the simple crashing tragedy of bad friendships and forgettable love affairs. That look in her mother's face was proof of it. Whole fluxes and fields and dimensions folded in on themselves and planets coalescing out of the fire and species thriving and dying. Her mother had seen right into something. She'd fired the best tool she could conjure out in the cold and Annika had tried, in her own life, to see a world like her mother saw, but she felt plain and simple confronted with her mother's genius. Annika had tried so many different substrates on which to grow contentment. The deep wells of the mind's word, she'd tried poetry, she'd tried modelling, she'd sampled each of the film industry's minor ranks, and now it was warp and weft but what was that versus aphelion and apoapsis? Most of the time she thought a simple life was enough for her, but sometimes she was so afraid. Her mother had heard other musics.

She closed the cases and she let herself back into Milton's room. He was asleep already, and warm, and when she got into the bed he held her, but somewhere around three a.m. he shook her with his foot and he was shivering and his teeth were clenched and he said, "Please don't touch me, I need to take a shower, I just remembered that you touched the elevator button, did you wash your hands, did you wash your hands? Don't touch the lamp. Please. Did you wash your hands? You'll have to burn your shoes. The red ones. You'll have to burn them or never let me see them again. Did you wash your hands?" He shook in the corner until she agreed to take a shower. He watched her the whole time. "Like this?" she said. He nodded. "Is this enough soap?" she said. He tore all the sheets from the bed. He asked her to help him flip the mattress. She got a knit blanket from her crash cases–it was chequered brown and red, and was to have been worn by the grandmother in the forgotten scene. "It's clean," she said. "I washed it this morning. I promise." She rubbed his arms in the bed until he stopped shivering.

In the morning she woke before him. They were naked. The room was cold. They were on different flights back to L.A. so she took the earlier shuttle. Diane was with her, and the script girl, and a few of the grips. They made their flight. Her mother picked her up from LAX, half an hour late.

Modern Anamorphic

"Speed," Milton said.

"Marker."

"Action."

For three and a half minutes he sat in rapt attention at the left side of the camera, in a state not entirely discernible from trance. He was keen, coiled tightly, as if at the tiniest release of hidden escapement he might spring off into the air. Tim Waz, at the back of the camera, stared through the viewfinder, but Milton turned only a small white wheel, connected to a geartrain and the lens.

At the cut, he ran the camera for two more seconds and flicked it off. "Cut," he confirmed, though no one was listening. All around him grips, electrics, makeup girls teemed and flittered, leaned against the steel beams of the warehouse, ran 8-gauge cables through the sheen of scumwater some poor PA had to mop the footprints from after every shot, all night. The sound man, even when they weren't rolling, left his boom mic angled way out into space over their heads, as if he were in fact an archaeologist, cataloguing their efforts for future study. Nick Smith, on the radio, said, "Hey buddies, can I get you to drop a single into that redhead?" Electricians, black-clad and armored in chest pouches filled with linesmen's pliers, dikes, voltage

sniffers, materialized from dark corners and rushed from shadow to shadow. Somewhere a light dimmed.

Milton moved little–entirely in the wrist, in the eyes. He mumbled something to Zelda, who stood with her hips cocked and cool, holding the camera slate from her relaxed right hand, like she were smoking a cigarette. She took the hard tape from his belt and ran it out to the actress, hogtied on the floor and being fed an Americano, iced, through a straw, by a film school intern. "This is the glamour part of the film business, right?" Zelda said to the actress, holding the blade of the tape to her eye. The actress smiled distantly. "Eight eight and a quarter," Zelda said.

The frenzy stilled. They began.

After Milton rolled the camera, he seemed to hesitate–to close his eyes, even, as if he'd absorbed Zelda's more meditative aspect. The tachometer held at twenty-four. Tim Waz sat beside him, tense, ready, but Milton waited. When he opened his eyes he glanced over the scene before the fluttering aperture of the camera, in surprise, or disbelief.

His job was to make sure everything was in focus.

"Speed," he said finally.

"Marker."

"Action."

He'd been back from Detroit for two months and it was time to work for money again. A season or two earlier, Milton might have turned the job down–a whole week of dusk-to-dawns in the blasted wasteland of San Pedro's forgotten wharves, at a hundred a day because low-budget

superhero movies never flipped Union–but he'd blown through the spring's paycheck in the first six minutes past baggage claim and he couldn't borrow any more money from Annika because she wasn't speaking to him.

They shot eight magazines through the night. Milton was worried he would have to buy a new changing tent because Katy Culpeper kept putting it on the ground in the raccoon shit. Milton had tried to sanitize his last changing tent by soaking it overnight–in his Eagle Rock bathtub–in a solution of methyl ethyl ketone. When he pulled it out it was just the frame and tatters of steaming rubber. He wasn't sure what solvent to try this time. He'd have to hit the chemical supply place on the way home in the morning.

Wrapping with the dawn, Zelda asked if he could give her a ride to set tomorrow.

"What's wrong with the Lollerskate?"

"They booted me again."

"In Echo Park? I didn't think the meter maids went up that high."

"It's in Los Feliz."

"Zelda..."

"Chip's doing a lot better," she said. "He's in therapy."

"We're all in fucking therapy," Milton said. "See you tomorrow."

Milton hadn't been back to his old neighborhood since he split for Mount Washington–what, two years back? It was cleaner than he remembered it, so he spent the ten minutes he had to wait for her surveying the recesses of curbs, the mute angles of courtyards, the dessicated palms still in the dead air. "Palm trees are disgusting," he remembered Yoni telling him once. "Every single

palm tree in L.A., it's got a rat nest in it. That's where all the rats live. Up in palm trees." Milton had taken to holding his breath whenever walking or driving beneath palm trees. He'd taken to holding his breath a lot.

Zelda came down burdened beneath her panoply of equipment, lurched it all into the backseat before he had time to protest, tumbled into the passenger. "Can we hit the hardware place in Atwater?" she said. "I'm out of pink and blue." Somebody was shooting on Franklin so he shortcutted them up over the hump. From the top they could see out over the city, the Observatory bright as a star in marble and copper up above. The marine layer hadn't boiled off yet–it would rain that night–and the Basin fell away in the scalloped edges of Barnsdall and Silver Lake, Baldwin Hills, the vast stretch dreamgold even at midday, down to the far adze of Palos Verdes rising from the blue haze of the coast. When she saw the way he adjusted the volume of the stereo with the hem of his shirt she said, "Already? I thought you were doing better."

"I'm just stressed out," he said. The light changed and he fired them down the hill for the 5. "Don't crash your fancy new car," Zelda said, opening the sunroof, putting her head back. Birds sang after them.

While she was inside the hardware store he watched the crowd of migrants on the curb outside, jockeying for position with each van that turned into the lot. When one window rolled down a man asked, "Can you do tiles?" and three of them nodded. "Fifteen a day," he said. "Get in." The three got in and the rest of them on the curb glared after them. "Él no peude colocar baldosas," one said. The others nodded, flipped a bird, laughed. Zelda came out with her

bandolier of gaffer's tapes significantly enriched–bright new pink 1/2", blue 1/4", tones and shades to blush even Monet's palette.

"I know how they feel," she said, and tossed her tapes in the back.

They drove down through the gray waste of the L.A. afternoon to the port. "So what's up with Chip?" he said.

"Let's not discuss it," she said. "I know it's a bad idea. I don't need any convincing."

On the straights of the 710 he wanted to open it up and try out the engine, but the freeway was saturated with rustedup bulk haulers and eighteen-wheelers keening for the freight terminals; all that industry, that surge of economy, that they fit into poorly, red car ripping south, Zelda easy and calm in her epauletted shirt and her hair wild from the sunroof, staring out the window as he navigated the portainer cranes and rusted processing yards.

"We're finally shooting on Hawks, at least," she said.

"Shooting straight-to-DVD superhero shit on Hawks," he said.

"Still," she said. "Real glass."

"Doesn't change what we're pointing it at."

"The Camera Assistant's Lament," she said.

"Film crew, right?" the guard at the gate asked.

"How can you tell?" Zelda asked, cocking her sunglasses.

"You don't look like longshoremen. What you guys shooting down there, anyway?"

"It's a mayonnaise commercial," Zelda said.

They were twenty minutes late but nobody noticed because the producers had forgotten to have the PAs pick up the camera truck. They sat on the dock and watched the grips unload and

array their wooden taco carts and all their equipment, weird ranks of chromed stands ("Always put the tallest leg directly under the weight," grips told their new hires), long sheets and frames of plastic in wild arrays of neon color. Nick Smith drove by at the controls of the scissor lift, munching broccoli, saying, "To our left, you can see the ever-so-glamorous members of our fine camera crew, using their substantial combined intellect–not to mention overpowering attractiveness–to consider how best to avoid doing any actual work. Wave to the camera crew!"

Two of the electrics following Nick Smith in close formation set down the 12Ks they were carrying–giant, ninety-pound lights, balanced on their shoulders like obelisks–and waved.

"You gonna put those things on the roof?" Zelda said.

"Mais bien sur," Nick Smith said.

"Make sure they hit me when they fall so I can retire from this fucking job," Zelda said.

"Consider it done," he said, motoring away. "Say goodbye to the camera crew, folks."

"Goodbye, camera crew," the electrics said.

Katy Culpeper–what was this, her fifth show with them?–took the laser from his belt and aimed it across the channel. "1480 feet," she said. "1562 feet. 1329 feet. I'm surprised it can shoot that far."

"That's why I got the expensive one," he said.

The three of them sat there lasing things for an hour, lights and stands and flags and cranes going up all around them, before their truck finally arrived with the sunset aching west, they unpacked their cases and carts and stands and equipment, they built the camera in the dusk, and with the dark began to work.

On lunch at around 3 a.m. Milton and Zelda went out to the pier to watch a car carrier in from Guangzhou swing across the channel and sidle into the slipway. A bunch of dudes from G&E were out there with them, smoking, and one them said, "How many cars do you think are on that ship?" Nobody answered because nobody knew. It was commerce out there before them, towering eight stories high, and they were in a trade entirely separate from commerce. The yield of all their own effort weighed nothing and did not need to be carried in cargoships across the sea. The carrier blew a double foghorn–from somewhere that seemed miles off, twinned responses echoed out over the water–and the ship settled to a stop.

For those sleepy cameramen and camerawomen, for the edgy G&Es working now on their sixth gallon of coffee, for the interns tailing after them with the magic still so obviously gleaming in their eyes, nothing seemed to move. The port, for them, was still, and so they did not see, in the dark, hidden ropes, stays, anchors, container carriers coiling, tautening, rising. The longshoremen coming and going bell by bell with the changing of each shift, towering over the land in gantries and the wheelhouses of ships, handled and touched and sorted and sifted every commodity, so much of it fungible, that built up the basis for the whole mess of country that stretch away inland from L.A., the edge. When the longshoremen looked out over the dockyards, in the sootblack expanse of abandoned works and collapsed foundries and gutted warehouses, they could see that night one ring of arclights shining blue, and tiny figures moving along the face of the wharf, whose endeavor and purpose they could not guess, whose value they could not measure, whose place, here, in the sleepless heart of the industrial city, could never be discovered.

And so with the grind of the dockyards turning in the night to push uphill their secular cargoes of food, of shelter, of power, the film kids laughed and flirted and smoked on the pier, oblivious or at least blind. Close as they were to the vital pulse of society, just across the slipway, they didn't see it. They had never been trained or taught to see it–they saw other worlds.

On the dock, as they snapped themselves back into their belts and harnesses, tested the blades on their combat knives, the batteries on their anodized flashlights, as in ritual or mantra, they smiled, they laughed, they leapt with joy. Inside, in Katy Culpeper's corner of the warehouse, the film piled higher and higher in taped-up cans, marked with black. In the morning they'd send a PA up to the laboratory in Burbank, where doctoral chemists would flash it through their salt solutions, paraphenylene baths, bleaches–and the film would come out bright, shot through with stunning contrast, vivid color, forms advancing frame-by-frame into the littlest illusion of movement, twenty-four to a second; twenty-four because it was the least amount of film they could get away with that would still enable the mirage. Any slower and the trick was obvious.

Twenty-four times a second that blast of light firing through the aperture; twenty-four times a second that blushing glance, that curling lip of the girl, that villain shot dead–the hero, the knight, the cowboy lurching into the air, leaping from stage to stage, frozen in space between the two horses. That night on the dock they stirred back to their posts even with the cranes turning in the gloom beyond. For now, and for them, the illusion held–as though some promise had been made to them that tomorrow the film would, indeed, come back from the lab, and not

with this low-budget superhero shit, but bearing other, higher inscriptions, as if something had snuck that night into the scene and they'd caught it with the edge of the frame, just so–

Birds flushing from sunrise, long blurry dutch angles of true lovers stealing up California 1 in the fog, something like a grace, or a truth–but only *like* a truth, because they were not stupid. They could never find the words to name their yearning but goddamn, who cares what you call it–"Just send us into the night with the camera on whoever's shoulder!", they didn't care who, but they wanted just to be *sent*–told to touch the dreadful magic keening in the air all around them, told to go shoot something that might salve that insane city boiling over with visions. Film it. Catch it.

For that one, perfect frame, the cowboy hangs in the air. There's nothing beneath him. There's nothing behind him. A man in calfskin peewees, ropes on every spare sling, bootknife–it's a fake plastic Colt in his hand but the art department did a good job and it dulls like gunmetal. The camera's caught him there, suspended in the air, as in amber. A man flying.

It started to rain somewhere before dawn and the electrics went crazy out in the storm trying to cover all their connections. Nick Smith came in soaking wet and pretended to be a pathway to ground, gnashing his teeth as ten thousand mock amps ionized his brain, but he was laughing the whole time. Six weeks later he'd be on eighteen hour back-to-backs in the desert–Milton would be in Germany, Zelda would be in Seattle, Katy Culpeper would tell the ragged desert wanderers who stopped to watch that yes, they were in fact shooting a mayonnaise commercial–and Nick Smith would die on the way home when he fell asleep at the wheel and drove into an underpass at a hundred miles an hour. Anyway.

Mike Jones, the new camera operator–in from Wisconsin, he said, but he had an aspect like he'd been getting slapped around by L.A. for a year at least–insisted on an overhead shot from the rafters. With a strange, manic intensity he grabbed the camera from Milton's hands and bounded up the stairs. On the third step he tripped and the thing went right into a railing with a noise like a kid falling out of a tree. The viewfinder snapped clean off. "Um," Zelda said. The producers went into an immediate panic and had to be removed from the room.

"Milton, how long to fix it?" Tim Waz said.

"We've got a spare."

"I'll meet you at the top–" Mike Jones said, reaching for the camera.

"No!" Zelda slapped his hands. "Bad monkey!"

Mike Jones sulked while Milton extracted the broken bayonet fitting from the eyepiece, fitted the spare viewfinder, asked Nick Smith for the scissor lift to take them up into the rafters.

"We'll just take the stairs–" Mike Jones started to say.

"We're not taking the damn stairs," Milton said. "You're an insurance adjuster's worst nightmare, Mike." The rest of the crew chased raccoons while they strapped the tripod into the cage with five ratchet straps, six sandbags, a rope, a pair of vice grips, and Nick Smith's pink and blue handkerchief. Going up, the lift wobbled but held, and Mike Jones was aiming straight for the roof and didn't seem to be slowing down so Milton slapped his hand off the toggle. "Can you buy me a few more feet?" Mike Jones said, already peering through the camera. Milton eased them up slowly into a gash in the roof, rusted out and collapsed ages ago. Milton, crouching, stood, looking out over the warehouse, floating in space.

The red ’95 90 looked tiny in the rain below. He’d bought it off a Bulgarian in Downey who was getting shipped back to Sofia because his Temporary Residence was up. “You’re a cameraman?” the dude had said, counting out hundreds on the stack of the table. “That’s great work, no? Good money? You must meet a lot of actresses. If I could have been a cameraman....” He said he worked for the cable company, he said he wore the overalls, but on Saturdays he drove into Pasadena and Silver Lake, picked up drunk girls, flashed them up the canyons in the howling car. “The girls here are wild,” he said. “The girls here are just great. You like the girls here?” He was handsome, young, he grinned whenever he spoke, he had two cigarettes lit at once, smoking in the ashtray. “Keep it in good shape,” he told Milton, when they’d exchanged the key. “Oh God damn it, keep it in good shape.”

When Milton saw the car from above, catching the docklights, his mood tripped, as it always did, when the light was right. He didn’t need to wash his hands. From up on the roof he thought he could just see a path to navigate, towards whatever it was he was after. He had a fast red car, turbocharger, three hundred horses easy if he could ever afford to get it tuned. He had six grand of gear in his bag or on his belt–he was shooting 35mm, he was shooting on Hawk Anamorphics, the best lenses in the world, they felt, when Zelda handed them to him element-out, focus set at infinity, dense as meteoric iron. They had the 18mm in the lens mount now, and its perfect matte finish muted the night.

Hawks used aspherical glass–an ellipsoid, polished to atomic perfection–to squeeze a larger image into the frame of 35mm film. Looking at the negative, the image was compressed at the sides, but when matched with complementary projectors–and viewfinders–to remove the distortion, they yielded panoramas to fill all of space. They transported, they transformed. They

made the light seem more pure, the vistas more vast, the canyons more towering and impossible, than they really were–with just a piece of glass. David Lean had shot anamorphic. Vittorio Storaro had shot anamorphic. Whatever their particular touchstones were, they had all shot anamorphic. The format was called, in certain technical manuals, “modern anamorphic.”

Such technical perfection required a discipline and asceticism, even, from its operators–but those few nights, at least, down on the docks, Milton had been up to it, 1.4 on the aperture for every shot because Tim Waz still hated his focus pullers. But Milton had been wide awake. His eyes had been parallax rangefinders of pure precision. He’d nailed every shot.

All equipment matched, all surfaces mated, all human error removed–everything was perfect, he thought for a moment. He thought of all those actors and actresses finally remembering their lines, hitting their marks. He thought of those weary pornstars in Chatsworth who finally made more than rent, and drove home through Canoga Park, past factories sparkling and bright, where people built rocket engines. He thought of all those migrant tilesetters, hailing the vans in the hardware lots, finally getting work.

It was like seeing a thing for real, it was like secrets revealed–they were learning the Old Hollywood Secrets, hidden like gnostic scripture, they weren’t even sure where they learned this shit from but they knew, *they knew*, “The real starlets are worth vaseline on the lens,” “Always cut with the hi-hat, not the kick drum,” “Take Fountain.” They took Fountain, dodging the traffic on Sunset to camera preps at Panavision Hollywood, Stall 6, between Lubezki’s AC and Kaminski’s cousin. They cut with the hi-hat, not with the kick drum. They smeared the lens with vaseline.

The future keened with promise. Zelda could ask to borrow money to get the boot off her car, and he would have it to give. He would go months without having to melt his changing tent, he would go weeks without having to bleach his doorknobs. Up on Mulholland, the fast red car would never stumble, the city would gleam, he would stand with a girl he'd meet somewhere soon–or had he already met her?–whipsmart, all collarbone and bad French, she'd balance on the bollards at the turnout, the stereo'd be saying "I'm Martin Sheen, I'm Steve McQueen, I'm Jimmy Dean," all those lights would be strung in catenary up the long slope of the Basin.

When he looked out over Los Angeles, it seemed finally calm, at peace, gorgeous–the black mountains were edged in gold.

"This is a standard viewfinder," Mike said, calmly looking through the camera.

"What?"

"The spare's not anamorphic. Take a look."

Milton put his eye to the camera and saw everything squeezed sideways, compressed into the frame–mismatched prisms, the wrong squeeze block, no correction for the aspherical lens. "Fuck me," Milton said. "Why didn't you tell me on the way up? I can probably fix the other one."

"No, it's alright," Mike said. "You get used to it."

Milton looked again. From above, the warehouse was all smashed-together–the love interest, tied to one of the girders and seemingly forgotten by everyone but the makeup girl who came to tend her, was tiny at the bottom of the frame. But Mike was right. Even as Milton stared, he got used to it. The bowed frame straightened. The girl caught the light. The eye adapted. It fitted its own alterations to the image, the perspective corrected, the world

normalized–as though the mind had some more perfect optic hidden away, to ease all aberrations, to remove all coma, field curvature, astigmatism–to correct all distortions. Modern Anamorphic.

The rain faltered, and Milton lifted his eye from the camera. The city, in a moment, transformed–as if he had never seen it before, as if suddenly some interceding veil had been removed, to reveal other natures. Out over the edge of the warehouse, the docks gridded and moved in angles all around him, the sodium-vapor expanse of ironworks, steel mills, coalyards, oil refineries coiling long whips of flame off into the dark–and in the distance the city, yawning, intent with nightshine, swollen and vaporous and shot through with arcbright flyovers and the interchanges towering up over the plain. The shapeshifting constellations of landinglights crossed over the city for the coast runways.

That was the other city. All over it people buckled, went crazy, failed. The agent never called, the job never paid, the green card never came. When weather came the rain washed all the homeless, sheltering down in the flood control channels, out into the ocean. Milton's cameras were all in a box under the stairs because he was afraid to touch them. His kitchen was blocked off with trashbags he'd stapled across the doorframe. He wore gloves to the grocery store. He thought maybe tuolene could sanitize the changing tent, burn it clean enough. Maybe turpentine. Maybe sulfuric acid.

They called Abby Singer at eleven thirty. By noon the camera was broken down, lulled to sleep in its foam cases, packed up and loaded into the truck. Katy was finishing her paperwork. Milton and Zelda stood on the pier, looking at the cranes and the big ships watercolored out by the marine haze.

“Can we go up to Seattle?” Zelda said.

“When?” he said.

“Tomorrow,” she said. “I gotta get out of L.A.”

“Fuck it,” he said. “Okay.”

“Can you get the gas?”

“I can swing something,” he said.

“I know I still owe you for the bail.”

“It’s alright,” he said. “You actually owe Annika for the bail. I was broke, so.”

“Oh. How is she?”

“She’s okay,” he said. “We don’t talk much. I think she’s seeing someone.”

“You alright?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“Your hands look pretty bad,” she said.

“It’s getting worse. I take two hours in the shower every night when I get home.”

“Maybe you just need a break.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I’ll be alright.”

“Did you hear about Abraham?” she said.

“No,” he said.

“Tim just told me. He killed himself last week.”

“Holy shit,” Milton said.

“I guess he was getting old. You know, they don’t live long, sometimes.”

"Poor little dude," Milton said. They were silent for a long time, watching the water. Milton was thinking about Abraham–about Milton standing on top of the van up Bronson Canyon, Abraham laughing wildly in the parking lot, Milton on the van with the RED up over his head, threatening to throw it into a ravine, saying, "This one's for you, Abraham!" He was thinking of the tick in the timing of that fast German engine–the tick that he'd noticed right away, even as the Bulgarian in the seat beside him said, "Sounds great, sounds great, yeah?" as they roared up Turnbull Canyon–but the tick that he'd ignored, imagined away. He had wanted it to be perfect and so it had been perfect. The engine would, a few months later, explode in a parking lot in Rialto, everything he owned in the backseat.

"I can never tell when I'm going to be immune from failure," Zelda said at last.

"Never immune."

"Well-innoculated, then."

"Soon," he said.

"How soon?"

"You're a tough girl. You afraid to die alone?"

She didn't laugh. "I don't know how much longer I can do it, Milton."

"Me neither."

As they turned away a long, low foghorn despaired out over the water, and when they looked the bulk of a containership passed silent. Beyond the tower of the ship the long parabolas of the Vincent Thomas Bridge rose wreathed in gentle arbors of fog that even with the morning did not sublime away, and it fell away to the east, into the sky and the smog pale pink as washed gauze. A 747 passed over in fast, long bank north, for LAX, lit with gold.

"Milton," Zelda said, turning, and he knew–but the camera was packed up already, disassembled, useless.

They made the Siskiyous in the dark. Shasta stood like a star to the south–it threw a shadow where she pissed in the snow. "Watch out for *bears!*" Milton was shouting, throwing snowballs at her as she squatted.

"Hey! That's not fucking fair!"

"Watch out!" he said, and threw another.

"Hey fuck off!" she shouted, tried to dodge, slipped and splayed out in the snow with her pants still around her ankles. Milton was laughing. "Holy shit that's cold!" she shouted. "Holy shit holy shit holy shit." She scrambled after him, got her pants up, fell again, he slipped on the ice in the road and went beetling into a snowbank where she caught up and buried him. "Asshole!" she said, laughing. He mocked trying to dig his way out, mocked suffocating, he climbed out and tried to throw her but she was stronger than him, she pinned him against the car. If they hadn't already slept together, a while back just to get it out of the way, she would have kissed him. Instead she said, "I'm pregnant." She stood back from the car and he stood staring at her.

"Uh," he said finally.

"Yeah," she said.

"Is it Chip's?" he said.

"I guess," she said. "But fuck that guy. It's not anybody's."

"Fuckin' a," Milton said.

"That's why we're going to Seattle," she said. "Shannon knows a good clinic up there. I can stay with my mom for a while."

"Oh," he said.

"I think she's not drinking right now," she said.

"Oh," he said. "Well. Fuckin' hell."

"You're telling me," she said.

"Carly's pregnant too," he said.

"Is that the script girl from the last movie?"

"Yeah," he said.

"Is it yours?" she said.

"Yeah," he said. "She wants to take care of it herself, though."

"What are the odds," Zelda said.

"She took a pregnancy test after we went and saw *Juno*."

"Is that a joke?"

"Nope."

"Jesus," Zelda said.

"Hey," he said. "You guys should have your abortions together."

It took Zelda a while to laugh. When she did she laughed for a long time, she jumped from foot to foot in the snow against the cold, she threw snowballs at him and she stood laughing, watching Shasta in the moonlight, and when she calmed down she said, "Will you go with me?"

"Of course," he said.

"You promise?" she said.

"I promise," he said.

Zelda's mom was drinking again so they stayed with Shannon's parents out on Mercer Island. "How are you doing down there in L.A.?" they asked Zelda.

"Oh, you know," Zelda said. "Getting by."

"Shannon has an installation at a gallery in–where is it, honey?"

"It's in Century City, I think, I believe, it's very well-respected."

"Well," Zelda said. "Her work is beautiful."

"It is," they said. "Milton, do you know Shannon's work?"

"It's very beautiful, yes," Milton said, and then apologized because he had to take a call. Shannon's parents cooked only from the garden, watercress, beets, zucchinis as big as your arm. They had a good dog who did not beg at the table but who followed Zelda and Milton into the hiking trails at Forest Landing. The night before her appointment Milton took Zelda drinking. She went straight to bourbon. At a townie bar in Mt. Baker the bartender said, "I don't care if you're getting rid of it or not, I think it's disgusting, you drinking like that."

"What did you just say?" Zelda said.

"You heard me," the bartender said.

Zelda had a well whiskey in her hand and was halfway over the bar before Milton grabbed her around the waist. She smashed the bottle open–unlike how they had seen it in movies, unlike how they had *filmed* it in movies, the break wasn't even, it caught her on the inside of the thumb, blood trailing after her arm as she swung wildly for the bartender's head–and Milton had to get her in a fireman's carry to get her out the door, Zelda screaming even as he

dragged her, “You fucking bitch, you don’t have any fucking idea, you fucking bitch!” By the time he got her back on her feet outside they were calling the cops so he huddled her back to the lightrail station. They found a drugstore somewhere in the night and Milton helped her patch up her hand in the parking lot.

“You alright?” he said.

“Yeah,” she said.

“You’ve gotta calm down, Zelda.”

“Yeah,” she said.

“You can’t be starting fights all over town,” he said.

“Yeah,” she said.

“You’re going to be a mother–” he started to say, grinning, and she pushed him over, wrapped the tape around her arm, made to kick him while he was rolling on the ground, she shouted and ran in circles around him, she had to shout at something.

“Listen,” he said, when he got back up.

“We’ve gotta get back,” she said, leaning over, “we’ve got to be up early.”

“Listen,” he said.

“Which way is their house? I think it’s this way.”

“Zelda,” he said.

She stopped.

“I can’t go with you tomorrow.”

She was breathing hard from the running. She didn’t help him up. “How come?” she said.

"Yoni called me," he said.

"Oh," she said.

"I'm on a plane to Poland tomorrow," he said.

"Oh," she said.

"He wants me to shoot a doc for him. At Auschwitz."

"Holy shit," she said.

"I'm sorry–" he started, but she stopped him.

"Go," she said. "Go. Of course you're not fucking staying." In Shannon's bedroom, that night, he slept on the floor, but before they slept, they put their arms around each other, he kissed her–on the forehead–and she said, "I know it's nothing, I know it's not the right timing, but I'm scared, Milton."

"You're not afraid of anything," he said.

"I'm scared of missing chances," she said.

"You're not afraid of anything," he said.

"I'm scared I'm out of control," she said.

"You're not afraid of anything," he said. "You're just a little too tough for your own good, but it's nothing, you'll find your balance, you'll be fine, you're tough enough to make it, I'll fold soon as I get back to L.A.–" she tried to protest here, but he went on, "–but you're going to be one of the few, one of the ones who makes it, you'll be one of the masters, you'll be able to guess the altitude of distant birds, you'll be tack sharp at 1.4 in the dark, you'll be one of the greats," he said. "Someday. We're not there yet, but we're close. We're too young. You're not there yet, but you're close, Zelda, you're so fucking close. Someday you'll have strong

daughters," he said, "...someday you'll have strong daughters who can do anything, anything, they'll be able to do anything in the world. I can be their godfather. Someday, but not yet."

In the morning they were taking separate trains. It was November. The rain was light.

"Listen," Zelda said, handing him his pack. "Go find it."

"I'll try," he said. He was holding the pack weird, like he didn't want to touch it.

She'd taken the bandage off her arm. It didn't look like it would even scar–not this one. The atmosphere couldn't catch the red that sometimes lingered in his beard. He seemed tired. "If you can't find it there you can't find it anywhere," she said. "So go find it."

"I'll try," he said.

"Here's your train."

"Good luck," he said.

"You too," she said. "Hang tough."

"Hang tough."

The doors closed and then he was gone.

Oh God Damn It All

When she finally did the numbers Milton owed Annika twelve thousand four hundred and twenty-nine dollars. She'd been being generous; she'd skipped over all the motel receipts from their road trips, she'd ignored the gas–93 octane–she'd pumped into that red '95 Audi 90 that had fired them up so many California highways, she'd called it chivalry all the beers she'd bought him. The sum included only money that he had specifically asked to borrow–no gifts, no shrugs when the tab came, nothing they had shared. All of that she'd been happy to spend. It wasn't like she was broke. But when the columns sorted out there was still twelve and a half grand, gone–a quarter of it at least to parking tickets and getting the fucking 90 out of impound, a quarter again of what was left gone to getting Zelda's fucking Kia out of impound, and the rest of it: melted out, consumed, burned like wildfire in the fields, on stalling his eviction, on bailing Zelda out of jail, on bailing Milton out of jail, on delaying at least until morning the final slap that might grow them the fuck up.

Of course, that had always been Annika's role. She could be angry but she couldn't claim she hadn't known from the start that was what it was. She longed so for the angle of the light and for the vision slanting in under storms; but she was never the one who'd go out looking for it. For however long–2006-2010, she figured–she'd paid happily into the fund. Was she going to fire herself off into whatever direction? Was she going to decide on her own to burn into the

night, on roads she'd never otherwise test, was she going to, herself, downshift on the fast turns looking over the water? She couldn't drive stick. She was in love. There was always more California to find.

Of course, when Milton disappeared he didn't tell her, and he didn't leave anywhere the cash he owed her. It wasn't that she felt cheated, or duped–she wasn't stupid. Somehow, every time he called her–midafternoon always, the day after the crisis, saying, listen, Annika, I know we haven't talked in a while–she understood he wasn't borrowing money, but buying it. For however long–2006-2010, she figured–the calculus had come out on his side, she got more out of the transaction than she lost, and she was sad, that his virtues had to come so freighted with backends. But nobody's perfect. He was crazy, she thought. Does that mean he ought to be alone? Can't I stall the course he's on, can't I get out ahead of him, buy his way out, buy our way out, isn't there some other world, where he'll come home despite the mice chittering in the walls of our apartment, where he never noticed the homeless man beating out his shoes in the alley, where he ever really fell for me?

When he left their apartment in Los Feliz–*his* apartment, she had to remind herself, she'd moved in with him, it was his lease she had to take the hit for bailing on because she stayed there a month after he left–she had drawn a line. Either he gets help–either I help him–or I never speak to him again. She had never been good at saying no, though. He wasn't cruel, she knew, or even much more selfish than average. He was sick. She thought she had the elixir, but it turned out all she had was good credit and too much patience.

When he called, she hadn't heard a word from him in a year. She had heard, from the few friends she had who were still trying to make it in the film business, that he had moved from

Mount Washington to Eagle Rock, that he had been in Germany, or Poland, or somewhere, for a while–and then that nobody had seen him for a long time. She had heard from Carly that he was an asshole, and she knew that Carly was not wrong, exactly–but she suspected that she still knew him best, that no one, not even Zelda, had a better handle on the peculiar limits and transitions between where he was a disappointing friend and where he was losing his mind.

"Hey," Milton said on the phone.

It was spring. Annika was living in Isla Vista while she finished up her Ed.D. at UCSB. She didn't recognize the phone number so she hadn't been gritting her teeth.

"Hello," she said.

"How are you?" he said.

"I'm good," she said.

"Good," he said.

If she'd been the sort to believe in things unperceived–if she'd been him–she might have pretended she heard some crackle in the signal that summed up the time they'd passed out of touch, she might have invented or intuited the summary of the interval. But she wasn't him. The silence on the line was mute and opaque. She could make no sense of it.

"Where are you?" he said.

"I'm in Santa Barbara," she said. "Where are you?"

"Montana," he said.

"For work?" she said.

"No," he said. "I'm living here now."

"Oh," she said. "Well. Wow."

"Listen," he said.

"Milton...."

"Would you fly up here, just for the weekend?"

"I really can't," she said.

"Why not?" he said.

"Milton, people can't just drop everything–"

"I know," he said. "I'm sorry.

"Are you okay?" she said.

"Yeah," he said.

"What do you need?"

"I don't need anything," he said.

"I can't loan you any–"

"I don't need any money," he said.

"Then what do you want, Milton?"

"Look. I can pick you up in Missoula. That's the nearest airport. I'd like to see you."

He wasn't as skinny as she remembered. She wasn't sure if it was beer or if he'd finally tripped into his late twenties. His hands were as bad as she'd ever seen them, dried out, blood on every knuckle, but there was grease under his nails now. He was smiling in the Missoula parking lot, leaning against a truck she'd never seen. She was shivering despite herself, but when she ran to hug him he ducked away, he punched her on the shoulder, he said, "It's good to see you."

"Whose truck is this?" she said.

"It's my truck," he said. "It's all I could afford."

"Who are you and what did you do with my ex-boyfriend?" Annika said.

The road north for Kalispell was what she'd always known his paradise to be–valley, Reservation clapboards, mountains in white and orchards in flower, high-altitude light. When he stopped for gas in Pablo she watched him in the rearview pump the gas with disposable gloves. The Indians looked at him weird, but he did not seem self-conscious.

"You're not doing better, out here?" she said when he got back in the truck.

"Let's talk about it later," he said. "Tell me about Santa Barbara."

To her, it seemed like not much to tell–she'd finally tripped out of The Movies a couple months after Detroit, her sister was living in Goleta with a poetess, she checked out the school one afternoon and walking the bluffs she thought maybe it was time to stop fucking around.

"How old are you now?" he said. "Thirty?"

"Twenty-nine, motherfucker," she said.

"So I've got a few more years."

"You'll still be twenty when you're sixty," she said. "Anyway, I...I mean, all I've done so far are a few tag-alongs, but I love it. I really love it."

"You'll be an occupational therapist?" he said.

"A speech pathologist."

"For kids?"

"Mostly," she said. "That's my focus."

The lake blued out over a ridge and she said, "Oh, that's pretty." He had the truck coasting in third and the windows down. She let the wind get her hair, she watched the

mountains turn, the shadows rush the hills. The stereo was saying, "It was the loneliest day of my life..." She turned it up.

"I met someone," she said against the outro.

"Good," he said. "What's he?"

"He's a lawyer," she said.

"Oh God," he said. "I will crash this fucking truck right now."

Later, she would remember laughing all the way to Kalispell, but of course that was impossible.

He took her first to the little general aviation strip on the south edge of town. As they turned from the highway a twin-engine settled onto the runway, the engines powered back up, and it took off again, banking north against the mountains.

"Ho, H.A. Milton," a guy said when they pulled up and killed the engine.

"Hey Tom," Milton said. Tom was leaning against the hood, mostly moustache, cowboy boots under his coveralls.

"You going to introduce me to your girlfriend?" Tom said.

"I'm not his girlfriend," Annika said. "He blew his chance years ago."

"I always said you were a dumb bastard, Milton," Tom said. He shook Annika's hand and he clapped Milton on the shoulder. "You doing alright?"

"Yeah," Milton said.

"You ready to come back to work?"

"Not just yet," Milton said.

"Milton here's fucking crazy," Tom said, grinning. "Did you know that?"

"I had some idea," Annika said.

"But it's alright," Tom said. "I like letting crazy bastards fix airplanes. It's not like, if they fuck up, it's a problem, right?"

In the hangar Tom cracked three beers and balanced them on the creeper he wheeled out from under a Cessna. "Annika doesn't drink beer," Milton said. "You got any pinot?"

"The fuck–" Tom started to say, but Annika took the beer.

"People change," she said.

"I think I'm gonna move to Los Angeles," Tom said, laughing.

"Even after his horror stories?" Annika said.

"All I heard was, 'Success, success, success.'"

Annika liked Tom–he was Old Salt to be sure, but his laugh boomed in the hangar like fireworks. He had his charms, too, producing for her, when Milton was out on the taxiway watching the twin-engine perform its touch-and-goes, a dusty bottle of minervois, Appelation Communale, that he opened by cracking the neck open in an engine vise. Despite his cowboy boots and his mountain drawl there was something in his posture that spoke of other ages entirely, when he had been other men–and he seemed kind to Milton, his jokes always held at 3/5 reserve, as though he knew the particular boundaries of her friend's temperament. She was surprised to find gentleness and understanding out here, on the edge of wilderness, but then it had to be better than L.A., no?

"Gotta check his pushrods again," Tom said when the twin-engine finally taxied in. "Hear the tick under the prop?"

"I think so," Milton said.

"You'll get it, eventually," Tom said. "Focus on the prop. That's the harmonic. Hear it now?"

"Yeah."

"Tick-tick-tick."

"Yeah," Milton said.

"Sounds like a worn bucket."

"Yeah," Milton said.

"We'll check it next 100-hour," Tom said. "Good to meet you, Annika."

His Kalispell apartment didn't surprise her. Somehow, after the airstrip, nothing surprised her–the kitchen sealed away behind a tarp duct taped–*duct* taped, and not a roll of gaffer's in sight!–against the jamb, the boxes buttressed against the storage door, the beer cans six deep in the bathtub. It was worse but that was it, that was her saturation point, it was like beyond that she saw nothing.

"Where do you wash?" she said.

"There's a shower in the yard."

"And in the winter?"

"Haven't thought it through that far, I guess."

"Milton," she said.

"I know," he said.

"What happened in Germany?"

"Nothing happened in Germany."

"Nobody ever heard from you again."

"It happened in Poland."

"What happened in Poland?"

He smiled. "I lost my shit."

"You lost your shit a lot."

"I lost my shit at Auschwitz."

"Oh."

"Yoni and I were shooting in this blockhouse. His grandma had been there, as a girl. She hadn't been back since. She showed us her tattoo. I was sure I'd never do anything more important in my life. I might still be sure of that."

"Look, I'm glad you're a friend of the Israelites, but plenty of people have shot at Auschwitz."

"No, it was. It was September, it was beautiful. There were birds on all the fenceposts. Yoni wanted to shoot in black and white, and I told him, no, look, we're here, this is it, we're here and it's *beautiful*, Goddamn this is the most wicked place in the world and it's fucking gorgeous and it'd be a transgression to deny that, that's the whole fucking point, you can kill six million people, you can murder six million people on a spot and guess what, a little bit later it's September and it's gorgeous, and I thought, this is what I can offer, this is what I came here for, this is a good. You can gas to death everyone in the world and you can't rub out the beauty. That's what I was after, the whole time, right? Isn't that what we were trained to look for?"

"I didn't go to film school."

"I dropped out, so. But that was it. That was what I thought I was after."

"So. You found it."

"Naw. Yoni wanted to shoot in this blockhouse, so we went inside. I was okay for a little while. I was kneeling in the corner, I had the shot just right. The dust was in the light. I was okay for a little while. Then I started thinking."

"About?"

"I started thinking, you know, the circuit closed. 'Hey. What about all the fucking germs in here?'"

"That was like...seventy years ago, Milton."

"I know."

"Seriously?"

"I mean, it got a little murkier. It was fine for the rest of the day, really, but by the time we got back to Krakow it was...I don't know. Anywhere people had been confined, kept against their will. Illness bloomed there, for me."

"And?"

"Well, Auschwitz was a kind of prison. I got a DUI a few days after I got back to L.A. That was it."

"That was it?"

"I can't drive by a prison now, without losing my shit. You notice how long it took us to get up here from Missoula?"

"Not really."

"Supposed to be ninety minutes. It took us three hours because I had to go the long way 'round the county jail in Polson."

"Well, it was pretty."

"I can't talk to Zelda."

"What's wrong with Zelda?"

"I bailed her out of jail."

"Milton, that was...that was like two years ago."

"Yup."

"You've got to–"

"No, I know."

"You've got to stop."

"Look. This is why I asked you here."

"Why, Milton? I can't save you again. I never saved you the first time–"

"That's not what I mean."

"You can't keep running–"

"I know."

"God damn it Milton how dare you drag me back into all of this–"

"Listen, that's not–"

"I don't have anything else to give you, Milton–"

"I know."

"You'll drag everyone who loves you down too–"

"I know."

"God *damn* it, Milton."

She was alone in the yard for half an hour before he finally came out. She'd stopped crying and the breeze was coming up. The neighbor's beargrass was shedding flowers against the fence.

"Somebody in L.A. wants to buy the truck," Milton said. He opened her a beer.

"Great," she said.

"Dallas," he said. "Remember him?" He sat back in the chair. He seemed at ease, somehow. She still, even now, could not figure or delimit the edges of his illness.

"Vaguely."

"He says he needs a truck."

"Well, go sell it to him," she said. She sipped at the beer.

"No," he said. "I can't go back to L.A."

"Tell him to come here," she said.

"I'm going to Nashville," he said.

"What?"

"I'm going to Nashville," he said.

"What's in Nashville?"

"There's a treatment program."

"Yeah, you do drink too much," she said, chugging.

"It's a CBT thing."

She had been making to throw the can into the yard, but she stopped. "Like, a for real one?"

“Inpatient,” he said.

“That’s great, Milton.”

“I thought getting out of L.A. would do it.”

“It didn’t?”

“You tell me,” he said, waving to the house.

“So what am I doing here?” she said.

It must have been his grin, that first winter in Salt Lake, that did it. Even now–what, four years later?–it undid most of her armor. She remembered Zelda’s librarian, up on the roof of the central branch, she remembered Zelda and Milton, in spare moments, giggling against the railing like brother and sister, scheming mischiefs, she remembered that he knew how to kiss but not how to cook her breakfast on her father’s stove, eggs burned to shit, the engine of that red car roaring them up canyons, turbocharger whining against the walls, she remembered other angles of the city out beneath them, mysteries and magics she’d never otherwise encountered, the spread of the bay, Palos Verdes lighting the fog at the edge of the world, and him, there, broke, sure, she’d bought the gas, she’d been paying the rent, but he knew the roads to take, out along the crest of Mulholland, out along the water for hours, it seemed, and they stood in the mist at Mugu, he held her hand, she left him, and she was never sad, to have left him–except that it was something juvenile in herself that she left with him, she was glad she’d grown up, she was happy, Ryan was kind, he wanted to get a dog with her, but she was glad that she had been young, once. Otherwise what’s the point of getting old? She was glad to have something to get out of.

Montana was too cold for her. The neighbors had a fire going. She could smell the cedar. In the middle distance the wind threw a wing of snow from the crest of the mountain, and the range receded north.

"Did you ever learn to drive stick?" Milton said.

"No," she said.

"Well," he said. "It's never too late to learn."

She took her time getting back to L.A. Her sense of direction had never been great but she forced herself to trust that few roads dead end. In the Salmon River Valley a storm crossed quick and she watched the hail against the hood. She spent a couple days in Boise, walked along the river, asked at the breweries if they had any Central Coast reds. She stalled the truck sometimes at stoplights but she was getting better with the clutch. Ryan called, worried she was dead, worried she was cheating on him, but finally he calmed down.

"I miss you," she said. "I'll be home soon."

She caught the edge of Oregon, alone on the steppe for a hundred miles. In the failing light of the third night elk were crossing against the wind. She was tempted to sleep in the back of the truck but she wasn't that badass just yet, and she didn't have a sleeping bag–but she bought a pair of cowboy boots in Winnemucca. "Girl, you're gorgeous," the cashier said, rooster feathers in her bangs, Reno in her eyes. "Are you a model?"

"No," Annika said. "Are you a model?"

"Haw haw," the cashier said. "Maybe if I ever make it out of here."

Her dad was happy to see her in Salt Lake. He was getting remarried. She hadn't met the woman yet but she didn't this time either–she was with family down in Cedar City. "When will I meet this man you're seeing?" her father said.

"Soon," she said. "He's kind."

"Good," her father said.

"You look tired, dad."

"I'm alright," her father said. "The carrots came in late this year."

"Come see us in Santa Barbara," she said.

"Alright," he said. "Say hi to your mother for me."

"Alright," she said.

"You look...well, you look like her."

"Don't say stupid shit like that, dad," she said, and he laughed.

She took the back way out over the salt flats and through the blue Nevada Basin and Range. The truck couldn't break the speed limit at full throttle but she floored it anyway, the moon out over the plain, the hogbacks bright in the midnight. The radio was saying, "I put a bullet in my Kia Lorento," it was saying, "I was questioning and looking back, you were standing on another track," it was saying, "And yeah, I found a new friend too, and yeah she's pretty and small, but God damn it Amanda, oh God damn it all..."

Dragonslayers

They used to burn people like you at the stake.

They used to feed people like you weird mushrooms. They would robe you in the entrails of birds and try to divine futures from the mathematical cadences you ticked out on your fingers, or from the lines you wore, year by year, into the planking of the floor, where you ran your nails over the seams. They used to think you were inhabited by gods, that you were an oracle to show the way. That was if you were lucky. Sometimes it was not dogs but demons.

Nowadays they make you hold doorknobs for six hours. Things change. It's like howling into the abyss but howling has little effect on doorknobs. In the hospital it's all wicked jokes and puns especially. People like you have a mind for puns. People like you see the world as a system of marauding patterns. People like you can sign yourself out of a mental hospital but if you want to get better the cure is doorknobs, doorknobs, doorknobs, and doorknobs are easier in the hospital where they make you do it.

There are people in the program with you who have to do worse. They laugh when you tell them about doorknobs, but they get it. They see themselves in you. They know you wanted to do something monumental and heroic but your adversary is small and round and brass. Nobody writes epics about doorknobs. Maybe they should. Maybe they will. You'll never do

anything more difficult, more staggering, more monumental than this. That's not a failing. That's not a tragedy. It's you and the slog, right here–plain to see. You've just got to learn to see it the right way.

Psychologists use a scale of distress to evaluate obsessive-compulsive disorder that involves ranking obsessive fears alongside hypothetical traumas–the theft of an heirloom, the discovery of a shame, the death of a friend. When the psychologists asked Milton to rank from one to ten the idea of driving down to New Orleans Union, meeting the Sunset Limited from L.A., touching the button to open the sliding door of the carriage, he said nine. On the comparative scale, nine was described as "Your mother is killed in a horrific car accident." Ten was not described so much as implied. There were things worse than the train, for him. There were elevens, two or three twelves, even. He would have been more comfortable in the fire of the comet coming down than he would have been facing a twelve.

They started with the easy stuff, then–the badge of the nurse orderly, the pen of the delivery driver (three and a half and three, respectively). He held the badge for half an hour. "Think about what's smeared on it," the psychologist said. "He probably cleans up after the schizophrenics downstairs. Urine. Feces. Probably blood, even."

"Yeah, maybe," Milton said, staring at the badge.

'"Have you been down there yet?"

"No," he said.

"It's really disgusting."

"Yeah," he said.

"Some of them can't even clean themselves."

"Yeah," he said.

"You're probably getting it all over you," she said.

"Yeah," Milton said.

"What's your distress level?"

"Four," he said.

"Do you want to wash your hands?"

"Yeah," Milton said.

"Alright. Touch it to your face."

The scale described a four as, "You cannot pay next month's rent. It is due tomorrow." Milton was good enough at that because there had been times when he could not pay next month's rent. That was not as bad as when–(a six)–he had had the money for next month's rent but could not bring himself to slip it under the landlord's door for fear his thumb would brush the hallway carpet. Mail was an eight so he never checked it. Paychecks and threats of default on credit cards came in the mail but an eight was worse than defaulting on credit cards so he never touched his mail.

But he was doing better than some of the others in the program with him who had to sleep at the hospital. He was living at an extended-stay across the 440 next to Vanderbilt. From the balcony Nashville turned and opaled with bands of rain when the summer came in from the southwest. Sodium light and lightning alternated gold and white. The first few nights he was afraid of the sheets so he slept on a tarp he got at the lumberyard by the hospital. He did not tell the psychologists about this right away because he knew they would make him get rid of the tarp.

They would have also made him get rid of the 1000-count box of 5-mil nitrile gloves, the six-pack of Lysol cans scattered over the counter, all of his various antibacterial soaps and detergents, and the unopened bottle of bleach he kept behind the closet door, as insurance. He kept trying to tell them about it so that they would make him throw it all away but he never quite could. One night one of the psychologists showed up at his hotel room unannounced. “Let’s see what you’ve got squirreled away in here,” she said, and was not fazed by what she found–she knew exactly what to expect. She had done this a thousand times before and she was good at fixing people so broken. “Alright,” she said. “Let’s carry it all down to the trash chute. No gloves. What’s your distress level?”

“Six or seven,” he said. He was gritting his teeth.

“Good,” she said. “Where are you hiding the bleach?”

737s went over the extended-stay when the winds were right. He watched the landinglights bank over the river. There were fewer helicopters than L.A. and the streets had less trash in them but around the university sometimes the pavement was cracked just right to bring memories flooding and he had a panic attack. He didn’t know if Nashville had a Skid Row like L.A. but at night unable to sleep he imagined it out there, everyone trembling in agony as they wrestled each other in the dark to sleep in the chemical toilets. He was not unsympathetic–the opposite, perhaps–but he hated to live in a world where people slept in chemical toilets because goddamn what a life that must be and because he had to burn his clothes if they brushed him when they murmured across parking lots or sidewalks. He was not cruel but he did see the world as a system of marauding patterns. Once, in L.A., he’d given a homeless guy deep into the slog up Normandie

a twenty to get enough O.E. to keep cool through the Santa Anas, and when the homeless guy reached to shake his hand Milton trembled in terror and vanished and the man shouted after him into the boiling afternoon, “Why won’t you shake my hand? Why won’t you shake my hand?” Zelda had tried to talk him down for two hours but she had to be at a camera prep in the Valley. By then she was losing patience. That was just a few months before he disappeared from L.A. He hadn’t seen her since and he wasn’t sure if she had gone to get the car he abandoned in a parking lot in Duarte.

None of the homeless guys in Nashville tried to shake his hand. He didn’t see many people. He hiked over the bypass to the hospital and he was there for six hours a day. There were individual exercises and group sessions and a check-in with the psychiatrists and more individual exercises. It was not a ward so much as a halfwayhouse somewhere between an airport hotel and a dentist’s office. Downstairs–by the end of the first week they had him going downstairs, wandering the halls, watching the schizophrenics, introducing himself to them, shaking their hands–was what he had imagined a mental hospital to be like, white porcelain everything, lots of locks on doors. The OCD clinic upstairs was more like a place people got tax advice. It was spotless down to the carpets, except for unusual objects left conspicuously in view–a spread of fashion magazines stapled to one wall upside down, an impossibly filthy trash can left to ooze its drippings all over the kitchenette counter, a handsome cherryframe portrait of Ted Kaczynski before he grew out the beard and started killing people.

“The trashcan I get,” Milton said when he first got there. “But what’s with the picture?”

“Think of him as a patron saint for one of your peers. He is afraid of blowing up postal vans so we hung this to prevent his ever learning this place into safe and comfortable.” Some of

the therapists were more verbose than others. "You will find other strange relics. Some we will place just for you. What geography it is that binds these obscure landmarks seems, to those unbesieged by the disease, impossible to chart. But it is not insanity, in the plainest sense of the word."

The people who wound up on Milton's floor of the hospital were not crazy, in the way one thinks of crazy. There was plenty of sobbing and shrieking but everyone knew their sobbing and shrieking was aberrant. In technical terms this is the difference between a psychosis and a neurosis. A psychotic does not know she is psychotic. A neurotic knows in every moment the extent of her neurosis. There are mental illnesses more devastating than obsessive-compulsive disorder–the slag these afflictions made of life was obvious in the other wards and circles of the hospital–but few leave the mind so capable, so uniquely poised, even, to observe and comprehend its own disorder. You *know* your behavior is absurd. This is both a balm and a terror. The balm is that you know there is something broken in your thinking, can identify it as broken, can almost tease out the exact fray of the break's edges. The terror is that knowing you are broken does not stop you from counting out the lines, sealing the doors with cork, boiling off your skin in the soup pot.

"Do you know Kurt Gödel?" the therapist was saying. "He was a mathematician and a logician–they hold him in esteem equal to Artistotle. He was an obsessive-compulsive. He would only eat food prepared by his wife. He was afraid all other food was poisoned. When she spent six months in the hospital he starved himself to death. He was a smart man, we can assume. He must have understood that his fear of eating poisoned food was a fear of death. I see sometimes in the obsessive-compulsive a fear beyond the threat of physical annihilation. It

seems almost more like an existential catastrophe. I wonder if, for Gödel, starving himself to death was not the more logical course?"

Years earlier in L.A., for whole seasons, Milton had been afraid to wear his seatbelt. He was a cameraman and his work took him to places laced with carcinogen dust, slimed in urine, alleys shelled in groundup trash. His assistants kept throwing the equipment in the goddamn gutters. He got filth all over himself–invisible filth, of course, unnamed microbes, salts of contagion never to be catalogued, weird death dusts he alone knew must cake every exposed surface. At the end of the day he did not want whatever contaminants had laced his clothing to adhere to the seatbelt, which he had not yet figured out how to disinfect. He drove home at a hundred miles an hour, ready to be thrown through the windshield, decapitated, killed brutally and in agony under the flaming wreck of his car, because it would have been worse, for him, to have the seatbelt touch his clothing. The seatbelt was a ten or so. Dying was a 9.5.

Zelda called him to ask how much he thought the car would sell for.

"I don't know. The engine's blown. Cracked head. Scrap's not worth much. A grand or so, maybe. But the program costs a fortune. I need all the money I can get."

"How far's Duarte from L.A.?" Zelda said.

"Fifty miles or so."

"I'll see if I can make it in the next couple weeks. No promises."

"I'm sorry to ask," he said.

"It's fine."

"How are you?" he said.

"I'm okay. I hurt my hand. Out of the game for a little while."

"On a movie?" he said.

"In a bar. Nothing I can't handle. What's it like in there?"

"It's weird. Today they introduced me to the rat they keep for people who are afraid of rats. He's named Norman Schwarzkopf."

"Like, Stormin' Norman?" Zelda said.

"I guess one of the patients had been in the Gulf? I'm not sure I got the whole story...."

Zelda's laugh on the phone was something he had not heard in years. He treasured it. Once, in a diner on Hollywood just before the 101, he had told a joke about Elvis that had made her laugh so hard she threw up. He had never been prouder.

"What was that movie they made us watch in film school?" she said.

"They made us watch a lot of movies in film school."

"The one with Jean Seberg."

"I think she was a manic depressive. They're two floors up."

"Even in there I bet you're trying to play the ladykiller."

"Not really," he said.

"No quirky-but-heavily-damaged love interest?" she said.

"She has yet to appear," Milton said. "One girl's cute but she freaks out whenever people don't speak to her in rhymed couplets."

"Is that a joke?"

"No. She's having a pretty hard time."

"It was good to hear from you, Milton," Zelda said. "I'm too gruff and tough to admit it, but otherwise I'd admit I've missed you."

"I've missed you," he said.

"Is it hard?"

"It's pretty hard," he said. "They make me hold lots of doorknobs."

"Sometimes you've got to hit rock bottom, I guess," Zelda said.

"Not sure I did, but. Maybe."

"You know, my dad told me once that we're all put here to fight dragons and demons. Maybe that's yours."

When he hung up the phone he took a sheet of paper from the folder on the floor. He was supposed to leave the folder on the floor at all times. On the paper the therapists had typed out, twenty-five times, "Place your right hand on the inner door handle of your hotel bathroom. Leave it there for thirty seconds. Touch it to your face and your hair and say aloud, 'I am contaminating myself with the handle, which has been contaminated by the toilet, which has been contaminated by the bodily fluids of the thousands of people who have stayed in this hotel room.' Repeat."

"God damn it," he said, after three rounds, through his teeth. The sink tempted, but we've all been tough once or twice.

You have got to endure harm to be healed.

Hippocrates would never have healed an obsessive-compulsive because you must be put in a room with total disaster. You've got to face–sooner or later like we all have to face it,

eventually–but you, in here, you must face more explicitly, more *actually*, the towering doubt that we're all afraid will consume us if we give it the slightest opening. You've got it to give it an opening; you've got to lock yourself in the cage with the tiger, and fight it out. If you are strong you will survive.

Everyone in the program had a different cage. Milton's was nebulous threat of infection, contamination, disease or death or corruption. For Milton's cage, the therapists had him drink with his lips against the spigot of the fountain, invited to the clinic a prison guard from Metro-Davidson who tousled Milton's hair, had Milton take Norman Schwarzkopf from *his* cage and let the rat play with his beard. Your place on the spectrum of love and hate for Norman Schwarzkopf seemed to be a good indicator of your progress in the program.

One girl was afraid that when she had a few drinks she would kill someone in a car accident or stab her mother to death and not remember it. Her healing involved getting blackout drunk and, the next morning, her therapist listing the myriad genocides she had committed and forgotten. "You're a monster, Meghan," the therapist would say. The girl would panick and think, "My God, what if she's right? What if I did break into the hospital nursery with an axe? What if I did throw my cousin off a bridge? I can't remember. Maybe I did that. My God. What if I did that?"

That was the point. Eventually, the mind tires of being so terrified. Eventually even the most terrifying of black nightmares becomes boring. Stand long enough touching a doorknob, and even if the doorknob itself had seemed, to you, like the last dragon, well, the brain needs to be occupied. Eventually the brain doesn't give a shit about the dragon or the doorknob, and that is how you get better. Everything gets boring. Even being afraid.

They were instructed to push the limits of their comrades in the program. Milton was, at first, too bashful at being cruel to master the art, but it fostered a lovely gallows humor in the hallways. "I heard you ran over some babies while drunk driving last night, Meghan," one of the numbers kids said to Meghan when she walked the halls with Milton.

"Seventy-seven thousand seven hundred and seventy-*eight*," Meghan shot back. They grinned. Meghan and the numbers kid were both near the end of the program. Meghan's husband was coming down from Chillicothe to pick her up next week.

There were the five or six (or seven?) numbers kids, younger than the rest, who counted things out on their fingers when you talked to them. If you used the wrong number of syllables they had to start over. Some of them were sorters too, or they were the patternstruck, who when they first got there spent four, six, eighteen hours a day counting the sequence of dark-to-light tiles in the hallway–placed by accident or not so that, maddeningly, the pattern was just the littlest bit off every third repetition. That made them wail and wail.

There were the washers like Milton, whose hands were scabbed and white and who only ever sat on the least edge of their chairs. Sometimes they made the washers cradle Norman Schwarzkopf during group sessions. There were the ones struck mute with the thought that when they opened their mouths profanity unconceived in all the wicked ages of the world might spill forth. "Don't say 'Fuck!'" the therapists teased whenever they talked. "Whatever you do don't you dare say, 'Fuck!'" There were the ones who couldn't stop checking the doorlock or the knob of the stove. They made them leave the doors to their dormitories wide open for days at a time. The ones who pulled out their hair were in their own little wing off to the side and so the rest of

them didn't see those ones much. Late at night sometimes you could hear them bouncing off the walls.

There were the ones who could not stop imagining themselves stabbing their loved ones. For one guy it was not stabbing but very specifically an eighteen-inch Stihl chainsaw and it was not just loved ones but very specifically his eight-month-old daughter he had named Claire, after her grandmother. "I *have* a chainsaw," he said. "I *have* a chainsaw." They recoiled in terror from what their minds offered them but the terror only made them more terrified. Imagine murdering your husband. Imagine you can't stop imagining murdering your husband.

There were a few people in the program with him who were afraid they were or would become pedophiles. There were three women and one man. The man had a daughter and he was incapable of changing her diaper for fear of committing moral catastrophe vast enough to destroy the universe. One of the women was doing better and said she was thinking for the first time in years of having a kid. They were not, of course, pedophiles; the pedophile takes pleasure in the sexualization of children, while the obsessive-compulsive, confronted with the most mildly suggestive image of a child, topples into hidden rituals, going over the image or the memory of the image again and again, hour by hour, shivering into night never wholly convinced they will not become aroused. (The therapists must have been on a list somewhere, because they had whole almanacs of this stuff hidden away, page after page of nine-year old girls in swimsuits–the girls, unfortunately, having parents who thought it wise to subject them so early to the ravenous image factory, that wanted nothing more than younger and younger girls to turn into ways to sell expensive cosmetics and designer clothes). The afflicted could never be convinced of their

decency. For the obsessive-compulsive, the problem is in the proof. Prove you are safe. Prove you are clean. Prove you are not a pedophile.

Then there was Gary from Gary, Indiana, who could not see a member of the male sex without his mind battering him with images of wildly unlikely homoerotic sex acts. “Are you turned on?” his mind asked him. Gary was not–this is what made him a straight man with OCD, rather than a very imaginative gay man–but that never satisfied that recklessly malicious wedge of Gary’s brain incapable of accepting doubt. “Are you sure?” Gary’s mind asked him. “What about that guy? Do you want to fuck that guy? Do you want to jerk him off? Do you want to fuck that guy right in the ass until he bleeds?”

Gary, after six weeks, was doing better than most any of them. He and Milton got lunch together at the Greek place down from the extended-stay. “When I got here I hadn’t left my house in ten months. I’d taken a phone service gig but I’d hang up whenever a guy came on the line. Any guy, it just fired off. They fired me. It still does; right now I’ve got an image of you and the scruffy waiter banging the shit out of each other and I’m trying to figure out if I find anything about it just so fucking hot but the difference is now I’ve learned to just think that’s kind of hilarious. Back then I couldn’t be around men. I was making my sister bring me groceries. I gave her cash that I had to keep folded so that I couldn’t see Jackson’s face. I’d imagine Jackson trying to blow me. I had to take down all the pictures of my wife because in all of them she was with her brothers. I don’t have any other pictures of her. I tried tearing her dad out of one picture where she looked really nice but I just tore her fuckin’ face off. She’s been dead six years. That was really hard.

"It's not even that I think there's anything wrong with being gay. I was raised that way but we all were back then. I think if I were actually attracted to men I would be completely fine with it. I don't go to church. My wife was a Unitarian. We met at Amherst. My father was a pastor. She used to do this perfect impression of him, 'Now, boys, remember the light of Jesus if sin comes into your heart, be not seduced by strong hands,' I laughed and laughed. Maybe my dad was gay. If he was I wish he'd have said so and been happy.

"All that doesn't make me less afraid. It's because I'm not that the OCD's latched onto this thing. If I were gay I'd be terrified of being straight. Are you sure of yourself, you know? That's it, at the end. Are you sure of anything about yourself?"

When Gary fired up his truck from the parking lot Milton and Meghan waved him off. His car stereo was saying, "Say you love me. Let's just say you loved me."

"Don't suck too many dicks on the way home, Gary," Meghan said.

"Oh the temptation," Gary said, and he honked as he angled for the northbound ramp.

"Walk me back to my room?" Meghan said with the light going. "No funny stuff."

"Do you ever worry," he said as they stood on the bridge watching the taillights in agony for the suburbs, "that you'll someday get so drunk you actually will do something you're afraid of?"

"Of course," Meghan said. "That's the point."

"I mean like...."

"You mean have an affair with a younger man?"

He laughed. "I guess I wouldn't have worded it that way."

Meghan looked at him. "No," she said. "That's exactly the kind of thing I really *would* do. I'm not a murderer. I'm not a psychopath. Don't tell our shrinks I said this because I know we're not supposed to reassure ourselves but I know I'm never going to hurt anyone, physically, I know I'm a decent enough person. I don't kill babies. That's why I'm afraid of killing babies. That, I'd have something to lose. Cheating, though? That I could do. I haven't done it yet, but I could. I'm already that girl. So, no, I'm not afraid of that.

"Did you meet Wanda? I don't think so, she left a little after I got here. She was terrified of getting shingles on her face. She'd imagine herself getting shingles and she'd just hit the fucking ceiling. Shingles isn't even that bad but that's what she was afraid of. She was freaking out so hard once they had to dose her in the ass with horse tranquilizer or whatever, right in the hall. We all saw it. Fourth week she was here–I'm not making this up–she got the shingles, all over her forehead. I swear the shrinks gave it to her somehow, smuggled in like the blankets that killed all the Indians. But the crazy thing, she was fine. Once whatever she was afraid of happened she could face it. She called herself Warty Wanda. She laughed. She *laughed.* It was the doubt that drove her crazy. You know. Doubt, doubt, doubt."

"It's a strange disease," Milton said. "We've got a surprising amount of self-awareness."

"Unlucky for you I also have a surprising amount of self-restraint," Meghan said. "You must have done some damage back in your day before you lost your shit. Come on. Hold my hand. No funny stuff but hold my hand. I haven't touched another human being since I got here. And no, I haven't washed my hands in days and days."

Wandering up from the lower floors with an orange hall pass came Johann. He was a schizophrenic. He was from Santa Fe too and his risperidone dosages were getting figured out so he had long hours of lucidity. He and Milton talked.

"You know El Gancho?"

"Is that the country club south of town?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah," Milton said.

"I used to think they were shooting missiles at my house. Big fucking missiles, ICBMs or whatever. I thought they hid them under the tennis courts. The doubles lanes folded up like a hatch. I still think that, actually. The difference is now I sort of know that's ridiculous. I'm not totally convinced. There's a part of me that thinks the doctors and the pharmacists and maybe even you work for El Gancho and you're all part of the trick they're playing on me. Not a big part, but it's still there, mudded out by the drugs."

"Why a tennis club?" Milton asked.

"Might as well ask Brahms why the violin. El Gancho was my masterpiece, you know? We're all seized by something. His was beautiful and mine is awful. Luck of the draw. What about you? I've talked to a few people up on this floor. They've got some weird stories. Obsessives remember things better than we do, for the most part."

They remanded Johann to Milton for an afternoon–"Daddy says to have me home by dinner," Johann joked as they walked down to the university library–and on the way down Johann asked him what OCD had been like. "It ebbs and flows, as I understand it," Johann said. "So. What was it like at its worst?"

At its worst, Milton hadn't worked in six months. He left his apartment only to buy rice cakes, crackers, food hermetically packaged and injected with so many preservatives that it would never spoil and did not have to be cooked. He wore blue nitrile gloves to the grocery store where the clerks did not bat an eyelash because it was L.A. and at least he wasn't speaking in tongues. Zelda called every few weeks with a spot on a movie. "I'm a First now," she said. "They're keeping me busy. I know I started as your assistant, but I could use a good Second."

"Thanks," Milton said. "But I'm booked solid."

His camera equipment sat in the closet under the stairs, untouched for ages, caked in tireblack and white dust rubbed from his raw, scabbed hands. When the sun fought its way through the blinds he kept always closed, flakes of skin hung and turned in the light like infalling comets. All his possessions were in cardboard boxes piled in a buttress against the front door. When he was thirsty he drank booze, and if he couldn't afford booze he drank from the tap–but first he spent sixty seconds at least washing his hands. He counted it out, every time, and if he lost count, he had to start all over. He did not use soap. He etched his hands clean with Ajax, with drain cleaner, with industrial bleaches he stole from a hospital supply store. Sometimes he used too much and long ribbons of skin sloughed off in the sink. To drink he cupped his hands under the drain and slurped down whatever trace poison was left on his palms and fingers. The poison was less dangerous than whatever he was trying to wash off. He was never sure, exactly, what it was that he was trying to wash off.

"I dunno," Johann said. "That sounds pretty bad."

"In film school I made a movie about a young dude with OCD. It was ostensibly fiction but I cast myself in the lead role. It was more documentary than anything but after I screened it

people pretended I was just acting. When I held the knife to my wrist I'd just left the camera running. In the film I left the frame for a minute. I came back with ethanol. I spent fifteen minutes disinfecting the blade."

In the hospital, Milton laughed and laughed at that. The suicide afraid of infection. Think of anything funnier.

Zelda said her medical settlement had come through and she was going up to Washington to rest and get the surgery.

"I didn't realize it was that bad," Milton said.

"Three severed carpal tendons. If I wait much longer they say the median nerve will start to die."

"Jesus," Milton said.

"Everyone thinks I tried to kill myself," she said.

"I'm worried about you."

"Don't be. You know me better than that. Listen. I went out to your car."

"Yeah," Milton said.

"I didn't know it was that bad, Milton. You left all your cameras in it. Even the Mamiya I was always so jealous of. It was hard to see. Why'd you slice open all the door cards?"

"I was going to try to disinfect the upholstery. I can't remember with what. It didn't really work."

"It was like a wild animal had torn everything to pieces."

"I know," he said.

"Well," she said. "The scrap guys said twelve hundred. Is that enough?"

"I'll make it work," he said.

"I'm worried about you," Zelda said.

"Don't be," Milton said. "I'm coming out the other side."

"Stay tough," she said.

"Stay tough," he said.

By his fourth week at the hospital, Milton was comfortable enough when he went down to the schizophrenic ward that he barely thought of bleach. He saw it for the first time, then, like an intraocular device clearing up the vision–latent corrosion now dissolved out enough in how he saw the world that he did not see only his own fears but now the wandering stares, the set jaws, the eyes alternating from wild terror to a beatitude bordering on bemusement, as though they finally got the joke.

Most were not doing as well as Johann. Their dissassociation carried even through soundproof doors. They saw lurking agents, devils, childhood friends long since lost touch with who materialized through the walls and foretold the arc of their lives. They bore visitations. One of them, whose name they all knew because he was the favorite of the nurses, who told stories about him, was Edgar. If you called him Eddy he became irate. Edgar experienced hallucinations not of imps threatening torture or fiendish assassins threatening blackmail but of hamburgers. He always tasted hamburgers, saw hamburgers sailing through the air in front of him, lived not blissful but perhaps not so miserably in a world constituted entirely of various substrates and concretions of hamburger. He tried to eat the walls of his room sometimes, but

was not disappointed–the walls, he said, tasted just like the most amazing bacon-cheeseburger you can come close to imagining. Johann was friends with Edgar. "Who's to say he's not happier?" Johann said.

"He's missing most of his teeth," Milton said.

"You only know that because he smiles more than you," Johann said.

And Edgar did smile more than any of them–but Milton caught, just once, late afternoon with the west windows in light like a glaze, Edgar with jaws wide being pulled back from the cinderblock corner of a hallway dogleg–the orderlies in frenzy around him, he towered like a giant, six of them wrestling him back by the ears and the neck–a look in his face like submerged creatures struggling not to be drowned.

"I'm not interested in psychological explanations," one of the therapists said to him in the back of the Wal-Drug down in The Gulch. "Whether Freud was right or not isn't really relevant. He was wrong, for the record. But the point is that psychological insights do not heal OCD. There is one specific treatment that heals OCD–partially, never fully–and it was stumbled onto totally by accident and we have no idea why it works but it's clear that it works. It's called cognitive behavioral therapy. You're getting good at it. You've told me you have a scientific way of thinking. Well, there it is. The evidence shows, vastly, that this is the only way to treat this disease. Everything else is just wasting time.

"I stopped believing in God when I started treating OCD. I have statistics on my side. I am healing more people than Jesus. That is an objective fact. To ignore the evidence and treat you some other way is not just foolish, it's immoral. They used to hang people like you for

witchcraft, Milton. Progress isn't always pretty but it is dear. It's like tunneling into the goddamn mountain nail by bloodied, broken nail. This treatment works. That's why I've never asked you about your mother or your father or when your goldfish died. Everyone is broken. You are broken worse than most but not as bad as some, and you are broken very specifically, and we will heal you very specifically.

"Now stop wasting your time and touch the doorknob, Milton. All-night drugstore bathroom, down in The Gulch? Even I think that's pretty fucking disgusting. Every winter they find a few people dead under the bridges down here. It's awful. The world isn't fair but you've got to live in it anyway. Nobody's ever clean. Nobody's ever safe. What's your distress level?"

"Ten," Milton said.

"There it is. It doesn't get harder than this. But do you want to get better? The doorknob's right there. Get better."

He did.

Meghan wound up needing some more time in the program–this medicine was a science, but not yet exact–so she and her husband rented a room downtown. They had Milton over for dinner a few nights. There was a surge of new recruits, ten or so in just a few days, and at their first group sessions they all clutched at their elbows nervously, mumbled through their teeth when prodded to reveal their afflictions–"Counting," some said, "Sorting," some said, "You know, kid stuff," some said. Walking in the hallways they seemed always to be very near the walls. One kid had come up from Alabama. He was real nervous. He told Milton about how he was afraid of chemical spills. He had been afraid for years but it had gotten bad the past six months. In his

Bhopal nightmares the billows of methyl-isocyanate pouring from Tank E610 never emptied; the vapors suffused over oceans. He ate activated charcoal for breakast. He knew he couldn't leave the house in the MOPP gear that he got from the Army/Navy store in Huntsville because then the sherriff would throw him in the nuthouse but whenever he was home he wore the chemical suit. He sat alone down in the basement, leaning against the edge of the couch in his rubberized gear and his gas mask and his friends online wondered why he was doing so badly in the video games and he didn't want to admit that it was because it was hard to work the controller through the hazard gloves. He'd got worried the nuclear plant at Browns Ferry was leaching uranium hexafluoride into the river. He'd stolen his grandfather's credit card and used it to buy twelve thousand dollars of radiation sensing equipment. The cops caught him out there in the suit trying to bury it outside the security perimeter of the power plant. He said he was lucky. The judge knew about the program in Nashville. His grandfather had the money for it.

"What's it been like for you?" the kid said.

"Well," Milton said. "I'm getting better. I'm doing pretty good."

"Does it work?" the kid said.

"The treatment?"

"Yeah," the kid said.

"Yeah. It works."

"Is it hard?"

"It's pretty hard. But you'll do alright."

"I'm kinda freaked out," the kid said. "They say they're gonna expose me to chemicals. They're gonna make me rub bleach all over myself. Can you imagine? Can't you get really sick from that? Can't that make your skin fall off?"

Milton was grinning. "Well," he said. "You seem like a tough kid. Somebody told me we're all put here to fight dragons and demons. Here's yours."

Zelda wrote to tell him that she couldn't bring herself to sell the car. She put it on a train up to Seattle. It cost two grand but he could owe her. She'd keep it for him. Maybe he could fix it.

The night before he left Meghan and her husband came to pick him up at the extended stay. On the stereo a chorus of children was singing, "The world's a shitty place and I can't wait to die."

"Milton what the fuck is this song?" Meghan said.

"Well, they're not *wrong*...." her husband said. He was laughing.

Milton stuck to two beers but Meghan was supposed to get annihilated and her husband was supposed to remind her in the morning about how she had set fire to the hospital. They went downtown. Crowds came back to him. When they crossed against the traffic he was released from disdain for the drunken rabble in chorus at the entrance to every famous bar. He hated them for not washing their hands more but he hated them less than he had. He saw in them something forth forgiving, which was the best he would ever do. He thought maybe he had been wrong in the past. He was ready to be surprised by people.

Meghan gleamed like a coral in the streetlights. She laughed. "It's good to see her like this," her husband said. Nashville was ugly and stunk of pissed beer and the girls came out of

the bars with hats eight inches too wide, hollered with a drawl they wore with the whiskey. The music spilled from every doorway so loud it melded into a yawl of static where the waveforms cancelled and reinforced. It would have been easy to hate the place, to hate the music, to hate the people. He did not hate, for whatever reason. It reminded him of L.A. with its noise and glittering magic. There were lights in the hills. Maybe he was coming to terms with the world or maybe it was just the antidepressants. Where young men in packs leered from windows at Meghan passing radiant he did not want to strike them. Theirs was a path, too. Understanding is only ever a promising parcel. The whole is unknowable, even to sages, and Milton did not believe in sages. He had learned to close himself to the world and he was trying to unlearn that. People were trying. Not hard enough, he knew. But trying at least.

Well past midnight Meghan was leaning against the jukebox. The jukebox was saying, "Anyone here mentions 'Hotel California' dies before the first line clears his lips."

"You sure love depressing music," Meghan was saying.

"Where you headed in the morning?" her husband said.

"Train to Washington State. I've got to go see a friend."

"Old friend?"

"Real old friend."

"Safe travels," Meghan's husband said. She kissed Milton on the cheek and waved him into the night. In the street people were raucous with joy. Guitars flamed in the sky.

That fall Meghan was back in Ohio and she was doing better. She talked to Gary sometimes on the phone. He said he had taken various pizza delivery guys as lovers and he just couldn't get

enough. His laugh filled the house even through the receiver. She had a drink every so often and she still worried she might have too much and hurt someone, but she and her husband were thinking of having a child. She had long afternoons where the day eased quiet. She got a postcard with Rainier bright as a star in the moonlight. The back said, "In paradise with a dear friend. We just rebuilt an engine. It fired on the first crank. I've never been prouder. We're going for a drive. Maybe we'll stop and see you in the spring."

They didn't spend long in New York. Zelda had a few friends in Park Slope, East Village, an ex-filmmaker on the upper end of one side or the other but he skipped that coffee. "Pick me up at 3rd and 107th, the hardware store, if it's still there." It wasn't. It was shuttered, but there was a big sign in the window, "Coming Soon!" He drove in circles until she showed up.

Negotiating the bridges out of the city she had the atlas open over her knees. In the back they had his F5 and her Mamiya and enough lenses to cover any event the road threw at them. "Stop here," she said from a rise. She took a picture of lights against the weather.

"Where to now?" she said.

On the Eastern Shore aiming south he told her about Slim. He didn't think he'd still be there but she said it was worth a shot. They wandered the alleys of the yards, the warships in the dark unfinished, they finally found the jerk chicken place but it was closed up too. There was a cop on the corner and Milton got out to ask him if he knew a guy without legs, goes by Slim. The cop said no.

"Maybe he's dead," Milton said to Zelda as he cranked the engine.

"Maybe," Zelda said. "Maybe he's alright though."

"Yeah," Milton said.

"Maybe he made it out to California," Zelda said.

"Maybe," Milton said.

In D.C. she had an old art school friend teaching photography at Gallaudet. After he dropped her off he bought dinner for an ex-girlfriend in Georgetown. After the second beer he

asked if she was happy. "People aren't so direct here," she said. "It's taking some getting used to." She'd almost moved back to Glendale after her divorce, she'd almost moved back to Glendale after her dad died, but she was going to try to tough it out. She took him down to the water and they watched the boats cross against the light. She kissed him on the lips but when he put his hand on the small of her collarbone she said she was seeing someone. "Yeah," Milton said. "Good. I'm glad."

"We've got to grow out of it," she said.

"Yeah," Milton said.

"What happened to your car?" she said.

"It's right there," he said.

"The black one."

"I crashed that one years ago," he said.

"I loved that car," she said.

"This one's faster," he said.

"Good," she said.

It was faster especially of all heading west. Zelda in the passenger was watching the city go behind them. The river fell away. There were mountains. He slept for a while so she drove. It rained through Pennsylvania so they kept to the limit. "Illinois," he said with the sign. The roadkill dropped away and the road was a straightaway. Zelda was playing "Iodine" on repeat. Somewhere after that was North Dakota, North Carolina, Nevada where the world dropped into the dark. They were up to the task. The tires were warmed up. The oil pressure was holding. Whatever storms they crossed, they crossed.

Other Californias

"Dear Annika," is how all the letters start, that I wrote but never sent–not to be That Guy, but because I was too damn scared, to touch the mailbox, or to buy a stamp. But I'm getting better. So:

Dear Annika, it was good to see you, in Santa Barbara, where you look: healthy, gorgeous, glowing (your mother be damned). Ryan is funny and cooked the steak just perfect, the wine had legs up to here, your new dog is delightful, and two million seems cheap, for Santa Barbara–these days, at least.

To see you've got that good sunset view, and–to look up past the Santa Ynez and think, "Vast, untouched Sespe Wild, condors alight," all tumbling untended right from your back porch, to think of you just wandering straight into paradise–I know you'd never do it, because you don't have the shoes, but, well, it was good to see. You deserve the view at least.

I hope it wasn't too bad having me there. I was sad when you mentioned Eight Belles because she always reminds me of an old friend. I'm sorry I threw away all your towels; old habits. You know, when you were dancing and that line, "It'll get you there," came on I was in your porcelain bathroom, snarling at mirrors. When he said, "I was solid gold," you cried, but in the dark I wanted to smash your window, tearass blind down the hill for the airport, catch the

first flight to higher elevation, never look back, like I always used to, whenever I couldn't make rent, or went particularly crazy. But I fought the urge. Are you proud of me? People change.

Why did you ask me about old girlfriends, though? Who cares what Elizabeth's doing now, or if any of the boys ever made it in The Movies. Why did you ask about those other selves? They're long-gone into that silver rearview closer-than-they-appear. Memory's tampered all our old stories–

Drove all night to San Francisco, for a girl.

Carried the camera up the mountain.

Stared all night in the hills after fireblack coyotes.

What's the use, in half-recalling all those other Californias we wandered in? The Chumash were the last ones to really see it. Sumac flower, datura-drunk round the fire. The man-dream. (The boy sipped abalone from the shell; if he passed through the poison, he was ready.) All we had to match that were those blue nights we fired up PCH in the seafog, watched the water in the dark, and the test was to keep inside the lines on fast turns.

What to call all those years anything besides wasted? In all of it we'd earned nothing more than matched pairs of regrets. How to fill that space it took back up? What to place there? Any truths we stumbled onto must have been faked; where were the magicians? Where was the curtain, and what man was behind it? Did we never see the frayed edges of the postcard? Did we miss the signs?

How is it that the past, more precisely than it has ever had weight, has mass–that times now barely remembered can, as even dark, dead stars still hold in orbit other bodies entirely,

exert a gravity on our lives, years later, pulling pulling pulling back to the goldgleam parabola of evenings we spent drinking to drink, kissing to kiss, driving just to drive?

How did it flash so hot, why did it fade so fast, how could we ever have passed sunset after sunset without ever getting up and going out onto the goddamn porch, to watch the light? Were we better? Were we thinner? Were we taller, funnier, better at sex, were any of all those days ever so bright as we thought, any of those nights so gold as we were promised, in the dream, before we abused all offerings, tumbled all mountains, when you looked at me that way you used to, did you see me by some other light?

California's full now with beach bunnies burned to leather, teeth rotted into wine. Nothing but actresses and Corrections Officers stateline to stateline. Shot through with sidewalks stained where the figs used to fall, black broken roads barring flight, through deserts–

And all the mad in legion, asking if we have seen, if we have seen, if we have seen:

Those dead Indians. That crystal coast, fragile as any chalice.

California Franchise Tax has a levy against my bank account. Eight hundred forty, they say I owe them, for the car I blew up and couldn't escape in.

Don't worry. I'll never ask to borrow more money from you. I've got the cash. I've been working real hard. I guess it's just the price to pay, for having been one of those gracious, gorgeous few, who saw–*who saw*–California, once. All those years ago.

When I went down to Ojai there was an old guy living on the street–he'd known Zelazny, he looked like Beckett–he'd been in Vietnam. He seemed nervous. He said, "We're living so strange." He said, "I think it's all just so strange." He wished me luck. I shook his hand. I

wasn't afraid. I took the back way over the mountains to Maricopa, old favorite roads for hours–but the spell was broken. The center stripes just passed and passed.

Maybe I finally grew up. Maybe I never learn. Maybe I'm not so stupid. Maybe I'm that much stupider.

Maybe I just passed through the poison.

Here's hoping you always keep that guest room set, and that Ryan doesn't get too jealous. Say hi to your sister for me.

I think of you whenever the light's right.

Yours