

A long, straight asphalt road stretches from the foreground into the distance, disappearing into a vast, arid desert landscape. The road is flanked by sparse, low-lying desert vegetation and sandy soil. The sky is clear and light-colored, suggesting a bright, sunny day. The overall scene conveys a sense of isolation and a long journey.

THE RIDE

A NOVEL
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THE RIDE

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The Ride

The Audit

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THE RIDE

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The Ride
published by
neverhadaboss.com



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2016
Erik Wallbank
ISBN: 978-0-9862865-1-3

thanks to
Ben Sager
for the cover photo
and
George Shearer
for the cover layout

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Produced in the United States

1

Well-behaved women are easily forgotten.

I watched it rumble across the Safeway parking lot, a 63 and a half Ford 406, two door coupe, shiny white, with black wheels. You need to know these cars to tell a 63 and a half from a 64. For the 63 model year Chevy introduced the 425 horsepower 409, which laid an open wound on Ford at the drag strip. Ford didn't wait for the next model year, introducing the 406 six months later, with 425 horsepower. That closed the wound. The Chevy was stylish and fast—the Ford, ominous and fast. When these cars rolled off the line, the Beatles and the Stones had yet to come to America. Forty years I'd coveted a 406 but that was an unlikely dream. The Ford eased to a stop—the cam making it sound out of time. She turned off the ignition and got out.

“Jesus, how old are you?” she asked. I don't know which startled me more, what she asked or how she looked? She was maybe five-nine, 125 pounds, in a smallish black tee shirt and trim Levis. On her feet, an old pair of brown slippers. She looked to be about thirty-five, with short brown, tousled hair. Her lips were full, her ears were smallish. She had a good nose and brown eyes. She was slim but looked tough. I glanced again at the slippers. “My dad, he always said you should be comfortable driving. This was his car.”

“Was?”

“Yeah, he's dead.”

“I'm sorry.”

“What are you sorry about? You didn't know him. And how old are you anyway?”

I was taken aback by this attractive, outspoken young woman, things I usually like. But all at once, and delivered up in a 406 Ford?

“I'm sixty-seven.”

"I'm surprised, but it's not a problem, just when we talked on the phone you sounded young, you know, like thirty-five or forty." Sensing she'd gone too far, she added, "Something about you doesn't seem old though?"

"I work hard at it," I said, "but a sixty-seven year old body breaks down faster than this Ford and in my case there aren't many aftermarket parts. I just left four, seventeen year-old boys at my house, quick, strong, in their physical prime, able to one hand over four-foot fences."

"And stupid as they'll ever be. I don't go for boys, I like older men. But don't get any ideas because older to me is forty-five, not sixty-five. How do you know the year of this car?"

"Because this car is from my time and it takes me back."

"Nice," she said, continuing her appeasing remarks in the same sing-song voice I'd enjoyed on the phone. Looking at my pile of gear, which consisted of a large, waterproof kayak bag, two smaller BMW zippered bags, boots and helmet, she scoffed, "Do you think you're bringing enough stuff?"

"I told you I had a lot and I need all of it."

"Such as?"

"Well, I have a tent, sleeping bag, sleeping pad, cold weather gear, helmet, motorcycle jacket, pants, boots..."

"All right!" she said. "Let's load it and go. I don't need to know everything."

"You asked," I said.

She unlocked the trunk but didn't help load. In the trunk she had a leather duffel, mid-sized, from Bates, with the Harley Davidson logo. It was a beautiful piece, maybe from the sixties, two tones of leather, orange and white, well used and better taken care of. Besides the duffel there was a tweed guitar case of the same vintage. I ran my hand across the duffel and the case. There's something about touching pieces like these.

"Both from my dad," she said, appreciatively.

"Some dad. Did you know that kids who grow up in rich households tend to refer to dad as dad while the rest of us refer to dad, as *my* dad?"

We crept out of the parking lot on to the boulevard and headed south.

“Don’t you live close by?” she asked.

“Yeah, about two blocks,”

“Why’d you schlep all your stuff to Safeway?”

“I didn’t want my wife to know I was driving to New Orleans with a young woman.”

“So much for honesty in marriage,” she chided.

“Honesty’s hugely overrated,” I said. “Lying does a much better job of preserving the social order.”

She gave me a critical look before asking if this street would put us on the interstate?

“Yeah, but let’s not do it. What do you say we stick to the smaller roads, *two-laners*, enjoy the trip?”

“Sounds good to me. As long as you know the roads.”

The interior of the car fascinated me. Compared with today’s cars, the cabin was spacious, more headroom. The seats were old style buckets in good shape. Being a coupe, the two doors were huge and heavy with roll up windows. How I missed roll-up windows! Lots of glass. Big doors for big windows, great visibility in all directions, with wind wings, a throwback to when you could control outside air. And someone had changed out the radio for the kind my iPhone and thousands of songs could plug into.

We headed up the Green Springs Highway towards Klamath Falls, the long way to New Orleans, but a beautiful ride. I wanted her to see it. Beyond K Falls we drove east towards Lakeview as the Oregon forest began to thin. Most of an hour I was quiet, which is odd for me. I thought about the car, about her, about what this ride might be? Assuming the gas mileage wouldn’t be good, I was trying to figure fuel to Louisiana when she pulled into a small wayside with portable toilets, bordered on one side by islands of bull rushes and a slow moving body of water. She headed for the toilets then doubled back, reaching through the window for the keys.

“No offense,” she said. “This car isn’t replaceable.” Returning from the toilet, she slowed and squatted next to the water. Looking in my direction she motioned for me to come. She put a forefinger to her lips and pointed down. Two feet from her slippers and next to the water, sat a large, translucent, green frog, blended in to be almost invisible. I wondered how, walking back to the car, she’d spotted it? Slowly I squatted beside her and watched until the frog made a long jump into the water.

“I forgot your name?” I said.

“Tara, and I was thinking about your name—too many consonants.” Like it or not, I was in a match of wits, my experience against a willful, quick, and beautiful woman.

“Where we going?” she asked.

“New Orleans.”

“I mean now?” she gave back with derision.

“The Bonneville Salt Flats—the scenic route”

Soon, we were twisting upward for more than a mile with no guardrail, the western panorama expanding through each turn before the road crested then leveled, straight to the horizon. No oncoming cars, no cops, a road where, in the spring, squadrons of Red-Winged Blackbirds flitting between fenceposts and ponds on both sides of the road. Thankfully, the oppressive 55 mph Oregon speed limit was now behind, swapped for the liberal speed laws of Nevada. It’s the same road but now it’s the gambling state—70 mph. Raise the limits, raise the bet. Give me the Nevada speed limit, anytime!

“Watch for wild burros,” I said. “This spring I came through here on my bike and I had to go into a long skid to miss a baby.”

She seemed unconcerned and didn't slow, keeping it well above 80. Big twin Holleys sucking gas like it was thirty cents a gallon. We passed a signpost for Denio Junction. She asked what was there? I told her about the bar and café, gas pumps and rooms. And about the time I stopped in during the nominating contest between Hillary and Obama. The restaurant was closed but still they offered to make me a grilled cheese. On the back roads people go out of

their way for you. It was happy hour, the place filled with hunters, miners, some cowboys, and a few women. I wondered where they all came from? There was no town. Two cowboys walked past my booth on their way out, each with a belt buckle the size of a small hubcap. One said to the other, "I guess it's a choice between a woman and a nigger?" I wondered which, in their considered opinion, was worse.

I've made friends with Bobby, who owns the junction. He lets me camp on the grass when I come back from motorcycle trips. At night I sit at the bar, sip a beer, and listen to stories. How the road from Lakeview used to be gravel, making what now takes three hours into an all day trip. I've been reading how our economy is forcing some county roads back to gravel. I wondered if the Denio road is on that list? Ahead, maybe half a mile, I could see where 140 intersected 395 at the junction. Tara abruptly pulled off the road into an open area where a driveway headed up into the hills.

"Why are we stopping?" I asked.

"Hungry. And not wanting a happy hour social right now."

I got out while she fetched a shopping bag from the back seat. She made a second trip for a small Indian blanket, which she spread on the hood, after making sure it wasn't too hot. She began taking things from the bag: whole wheat crackers, raw almond butter, a jar of honey, a knife, some bananas, and plastic knives and forks. Then one more trip into the Ford for a gallon of water and two tin cups.

"Don't get anything on the cloth," she said.

A long mountain ridge etched on the blue.

After we ate, I walked to a couple of trees from where I could see the parking area as part of the landscape with the Ford in it. But I couldn't see Tara. Then I saw her raise up from some bushes on the driveway where she was probably peeing. Back at the car, I asked her to open the trunk, which she needed to do with the key, to get one of my BMW bags.

Heading south on 395, I asked, "Okay, if I plug in my phone and play some music?"

"I don't have an adaptor," she said.

“No worries, I travel with an adaptor and a guitar pick.”

“You a guitar player?”

“And a singer.”

“And a singer,” she mocked, which made me laugh. I connected my phone, plugged the charger into the cigarette lighter and hit play.

“Tara, there’s thousands of songs here. If something comes up you don’t want to hear just say so and I’ll skip it. Do you listen to music while you drive?”

“What kind of dumb question is that?” she asked, in her accommodating way. I thought about traveling with my wife. She’d rather have it quiet. Maybe it’s an age thing, then again, I’m older than my wife? I wondered if Tara would like my music as Buck Owens started into “Act Naturally”, then Joe Tex, “Ain’t Gonna Bump No More”, followed by Hank Williams 3 doing “Atlantic City”, and another six or eight artists doing tunes beginning with the letter A.

“I’ve heard most of these. My father’s music.”

“How old would he be?”

“Hasn’t been gone a year. He was sixty-four.”

I thought we’d stay in Winnemucca, and though it wasn’t yet evening, the motel parking lots were filled with construction trucks, most set up for welding. Where we stopped to inquire, the manager told us there would be no rooms because of pipeline work. Afternoon shadows were growing long when we stopped for gas before continuing east. In the old days, there would be a truck, sometimes a tow truck or a pickup, parked out front of a gas station. Here there were two derelict cars, both 56 Plymouths, one a sedan, the other a station wagon. The sedan interested me more because my family came to the United States, from Toronto, in a 56 Canadian Dodge with Plymouth rear fins. The Canadians didn’t have a car company. Instead they innovated by assembling the Big 3’s cars in Canada, sporting them out by mixing body parts and engines. A Canadian sense of style? While Tara pumped the gas, I went to look at the Plymouths, taking pictures with my phone. Ex-

cept for the color scheme, the sedan was identical to my dad's, including the PowerFlite, pushbutton transmission. Nothing in my recent past so clearly recalled my childhood and my troubled family. I asked Tara to open the trunk again so I could get my MacBook, and as we rode towards Utah, the cab filled with "Bette Davis Eyes", "Bewildered", "Big River", "Billie Jean", and sundry songs beginning with the letter B, I worked on a poem I finished as the sky ahead streaked shades of red.

"What'd you write?"

"A poem."

"Read it to me."

"Okay, soon as we pull over."

"No, read it to me now," she said, as we crested and headed down towards the neon lights of Wendover. I read:

little america

at winnemucca
we stop for gas
the station truck
out front
is a car
a 56 plymouth
my dad had one
a pink and black 56 dodge
i think of elvis
a kid in memphis
purple shirts
silk jackets
with narrow lapels
pink peggers
tight at the ankles
with a little pants belt
in the back
jerry lee in ferriday

roy in wink
buddy in lubbock
juke joint boys
pumping juice into black music

which elvis are we
young passionate
old decrepit
which postage stamp
of the king
do we choose
are we the kid
who made rock and roll
or vegas elvis
big caped
stomach fat
dyed hairdo
tired sweat
drugs
and early death

thank god for sam phillips
he didn't like the opry
the safe music
the percy faith orchestra
he liked the music
of the country
of the people
he knew confidence was everything
and these boys
who swapped religious guilt
for rockabilly
were america
with a crazy hunger to be heard
more than writers
bigger than movie stars

beyond poets
there's no success
like standing up there
and playing that music

my dad telling me
to turn that shit off
words that ended an era
dewey phillips
spinning 45s in memphis
wondering
what to do with
'that's all right momma'
playing it over and over
it wasn't black
it wasn't white
it was different
60 years later
kanye doesn't get it
he doesn't get taylor
but he gets beyonce
i get black music
but they think
mine is stolen
john lennon got it right
"before elvis
there was nothing"
sam phillips made it possible
he could tell
what somebody had
when they came through the door
it wasn't about reading music
it was about reading souls

i got religion
and phillips is the dalai lama

the church
702 union street
memphis tennessee
along with chuck berry
and little richard
the boys are the saints

each of us decides
if money's the currency
of free speech
are we pat boone
or are we elvis
82 year old
fashion photographer
bill cunningham
gets it right
"you see if you don't take money
they can't tell you
what to do kid...
money's the cheapest thing
liberty freedom
the most expensive"

she touches my shoulder
rousing me
to hang up the nozzle
we slip into
the high desert night

I finished reading as she pulled the Ford under the neon lights of the Montego Bay Hotel.

"Did you just write that?" she asked. "Cause it's good."
"Thanks."

"I get the poetic license," she added, "but you didn't pump the gas and I didn't touch your shoulder."

"Right. I meant to say I was being driven to New Orleans by an prude who's going to drive the whole way, making certain I don't touch the car or her." She gave a little smile and I kept on:

"This hotel we're parked next to costs more than \$200 a night for a double room and we haven't yet talked about whether we're sharing a room. We could get two rooms, or one of us, or both, could sleep in the car."

"Sorry," she said. "I was thinking about sleeping in the back seat because other than the car and what's in the trunk and the \$400 you're giving me for gas, I have about sixty dollars and some food."

"Look," I said. "I took this ride for the adventure, not to save money. We can share a room with two beds without it being a problem. Most motels charge ten dollars for the second person, which I can handle. Unless you want to sleep in the car, I know an older casino that's about thirty bucks."

We sat in the casino restaurant. I ordered a BLT on wheat without mayonnaise. She had a salad.

"I don't like these places," she said. "I'd rather eat the food I brought."

"Yeah, but then we'd miss out on the culture."

"You call this culture? These gambling towns are nothing but low life and I can do without them."

"Tara, this town's part of our culture. Culture isn't just the good stuff, it's everything. Besides, what's gone on in the American West is epic. It's the stuff of dreams. More than that, the stuff of myth, the defining stories of justice!"

"Blah, blah, blah, blah," she said. This place is seedy and run down. Everybody smokes, and if that weren't bad enough, you need to see this dive as myth."

We were both tired and I didn't push it. We finished eating and went up to our room. In ten minutes we were asleep.

2

The king takes the queen, honey—every time.

I woke before eight. Tara was asleep in her bed, facing me. It felt good to have her with me, but since it's her car, I suppose I'm with her, but since I'm doing most of the paying... . As quietly as I could I got down on the floor and did pushups. Everyday, I do my age in two sets and once during the year I do them in one set. Finishing the first set, I looked up to find her smiling.

"I hope you're not trying to impress me?"

"No, I'm trying to impress me," I said. "Did you sleep well?"

"Not bad. You snore like an old man."

"I am an old man, but was it better than sleeping in the car?"

While Tara took a shower, I finished exercising. Maybe not to be outdone by me exercising in my boxers, she came out of the bathroom in her underwear and dressed in the room. Last night she was peevish and moralizing. Now she was a good-looking woman showing some skin.

She didn't want to go back to the restaurant but I reminded her it's hard to mess up breakfast. Like the night before, diners were few. After we ordered, she asked, "That poem, do you have others as good?"

"A few. Last year at this hotel I started a novel."

"How far did you get?"

"Maybe eighty pages."

"Is it on your computer?" I told her it was.

"Read some to me."

"When?"

"How about now, while we wait for this fine cuisine? Might upgrade the place." She got into her purse and gave me the keys to the Ford. I was surprised.

"I'm thinking," she said, "if you can write that poem, call me a prude, pay for my room and meals, and not come on to me, you probably won't steal my car."

I walked out to the Ford wondering if I could get all the way to Louisiana without coming on to Tara?

When I got back, breakfast was on the table, blueberry pancakes, bacon, and eggs. I fixed my cakes with just a little butter and a couple of packets of jam. What's in the jam can't be as poisonous as what's in the syrup. Eating, I began to read:

One afternoon, Simone, my wife of twelve years, left me and our ten year old son Mercury, without a word, without a call, without so much as an email. A few days later, I won Lotto America with the only ticket I'd ever bought. I didn't tell her friends or her family. That was almost a year ago.

My friend Bobby tells a story about taking his son, Cam, to Bonneville when Cam was ten or eleven, and letting him drive the truck 110 miles an hour out on the salt flats. When his wife found out, she wasn't happy. Cam also told her they went into Vegas, parked in a poorer section of town and walked the whole strip, chatting with Mexican illegals, who were passing out cards with pictures of naked girls on one side and a phone number on the other, while trucks cruised the strip, pulling large plywood signs on trailers—*a girl to your room in twenty minutes*. Cam told his mom the whole city was about sex and money, at which point she gave up trying to understand Bobby's parenting style. Mercury and I have no wife or mom in our lives. There's no woman to critique my conduct. I'm responsible for keeping things together, which is a tough call for a sixty year-old black man, who never really grew up.

There's nothing better than driving through Nevada, heading for Utah, with my son. High desert, sparingly clad, washed in mountain light—an economy of the sparse. I read somewhere that with meager precipitation and a lack of soil nutrients, the Bristlecone Pine lives for 8000 years, in places other species of trees and brush

can't survive. As a consequence, the bristlecones have the southern slopes to themselves, their wide spacing eliminates the threat of fire, and their dense wood, rich in turpentine, disinterests insects. Living in the high desert has to do with deprivation, suggesting anyone desiring a long life should retreat to a desolate location, go on a starvation diet, drink sparingly, and make oneself repellent to visitors, while avoiding the company of their own kind.

From Winnemucca, we made climbs and descents to Wendover where, in the middle of town, Pacific Time separates from Mountain Time. The Nevada side of town has the casinos, while the Utah side has none and has no discernible business model. Some time back, an initiative to annex all of Wendover into Nevada deadlocked the city council and was voted down by the mayor.

The first time Bobby brought Cam to Wendover, he came for three things, the high desert, the Bonneville Salt Flats, and the western end of town—a neon, gambling town where the salt flats pushes up against the first mountains of Nevada. The whole place is alive with ghost of Bert Monroe breaking the land speed record on his *Indian*, and Art Arfons', *Green Monster*, chasing world records and the sound barrier.

The gaming section of Wendover is like Vegas where rooms go for between cheap and spendy. Some of the hotels are glitzy statements in the desert, but one casino, at the west end of town, offers a clean room for thirty bucks. Once they'd checked in, Cam asked if they could bet. Bobby said no, that gambling's a tax on the stupid. It's more fun to watch. With Cam visibly let down, Bobby put a dollar in the slot machine with the big handle. Since kids aren't allowed in the casinos except to walk through to restaurants and use the bathrooms, Cam stood off to the side while Bobby pulled the handle. The slots fell into place—all cherries—twenty dollars. Cam shrieked at the sound of dollars hitting stainless steel. But before Cam got his money, Bobby made him walk through the parking lot.

“Why dad? I want to eat.”

“Because there’s something here to see. Trust me.” They walked through the lot counting cars, thirty-three from Utah, eleven from Nevada, and five from other places.

“So what dad?”

“So what? Thirty-three cars have come a hundred and some miles from Salt Lake to gamble. Gambling isn’t allowed in Utah where the Mormons live by the rules, five days a week, but by the weekend they’ve had enough and it’s off to Wendover.”

“You don’t even like to gamble dad?”

“No, but I can if I want to, or do whatever else I feel like doing; so to me it’s no big deal.”

I looked up at Tara. She seemed disinterested or distracted? I kept on:

Around ten Merc fell asleep and I was still hungry. Since his mother’s been gone he’s grown up fast but I still don’t like to leave him alone. From the casino I jogged across the Wendover main drag, aware that I was a black man running from a casino. At the convenience store, what they had was hot dogs, which was better than nothing. I got a Philly dog and a bun, self serve, and pushed the mustard handle. What came out was a yellow liquid bird vomit. I lifted the lid to find a plastic, mustard bag, empty, except for a watery residue. I took the dog to the counter and told the guy about the mustard.

“You took the dog and added condiments,” he said. “so you have to pay the two bucks. But because you had a problem I’ll give you two dogs for two bucks.”

“That’s a deal, my wallet’s in the car.” I trotted back across the street and slowed to a walk approaching the casino with no intention of going back when I saw them at the edge of my vision just before they hit the lights and pulled between me and the casino doors. They both got out. I wondered why this little town needed two cops in a car, but it was a weekend night. The one closest to me said, “Put your hands on the roof of the car, sir.”

“Am I under arrest?”

“No sir, it’s procedure.”

“If I’m not under arrest, why am I putting my hands on the roof of the car?” Without answering, he grabbed my arm and used his hip to move me towards the car.

“We’re just doing our job, sir. We witnessed you running from the store and we need to determine no crime was committed.”

“Guilty until proven innocent?” I offered. No reply. He patted me down while his partner was on the phone.

“Walt says this guy made a problem about hot dogs and hasn’t paid for what he took.”

Walt, I thought, small town.

“We’re going to handcuff you and return to the store to sort this out.”

“But officer, no law was broken. The guy ran out of mustard.”

“Do you have some ID, sir?” While one radioed in my ID, the other cuffed me and put me in the back of the car. I heard the radio come back as ‘no record’. They got in the car and drove across the street. Walt looked me over with a smile.

“Yeah that’s him. He took a hot dog and put some fixins on it. Said he had to go to his car for cash but he didn’t come back”.

The cops seemed to be enjoying themselves.

“You guys saw me. I wasn’t out of this store twenty seconds before you talked to me?”

“But you weren’t going to your car for cash. You were going into the casino. You were not coming back to pay, which is the same as stealing. And when you took your license out, there was money in your wallet.”

I told them about the mustard. In the middle of my telling, Walt said, “Why don’t you officers have a dog on the house and while you’re at it, don’t forget your mustard.” They each took a dog from the rollers and a bun from the stainless steel drawer. The bigger cop depressed the mustard handle and out it came in a thick, even, yellow stream. They ate their dogs, and the smaller one, who’s nameplate spelled Gill, gave a quick wink to Walt, who produced my dog from the counter behind him. It looked worse than the last time I’d seen it.

“I don’t know what he did to this dog but he owes for it.”

The bigger cop said, “I think you owe Walt here twenty for the food and the trouble.” I nodded assent and they uncuffed me. I took twenty from my wallet and handed it to Walt.

“My license?” I asked, of the bigger cop. He removed it from the small clipboard and handed it to me. I couldn’t resist walking to the hot dog rollers for a fat cheese dog, which I put in a bun, smothered it with ketchup and sauerkraut, walked back to the counter for my other dog and dropped them both in the trash.

“That’s another two dollars,” said Walt.

“Two for two dollars was your offer Walt, plus an eighteen dollar tip,” I said, heading for the door.

“We best not be seeing you again tonight, Mr. Coupe,” said Gill, “or we’ll be coming by for you in our sedan.” They all three laughed and I headed across the street. Approaching my truck from behind some cars, I could see them in the store. I got in and drove to the McDonald’s drive-up window where I ordered a couple of Angus burgers, no fries or sugar water. Back at the hotel, the police were gone. I parked in the least conspicuous place I could find, near an exit.

Again, I looked up at Tara. She seemed vexed. I should have asked what was up but I kept on reading.

Mercury was deep in sleep so I turned on the TV, real low, and watched Jimmy Stewart face down Lee Marvin in *Liberty Valence*. I ate, thinking how the 60’s gave blacks the right to eat, but customer service is something we still look forward to. I fell asleep, at some point startled by a quivering wall next to the bed. The accompanying racket built to a crescendo, then stopped. It woke me, but not quite to consciousness. Then it happened again, taking me back to my motorcycle ride across Russia where the safest place to sleep was along the Trans-Siberian railroad. Trains came by every five or ten minutes but soon became white noise and I slept though it. Whatever was causing this racket wasn’t white noise and I wasn’t in Siberia. I was in a hotel room in Nevada. I put my pants

on and went into the hall, barefoot. On the alcove wall, opposite my bed, was a huge soda machine, which started up as I stood there. I couldn't be the first person to have a problem with this monstrosity. Checking behind it, I saw there was just enough room to unplug it, which I did, and went back to bed, blessedly falling asleep.

A precise, loud knock, made with an object harder than knuckles, woke me. In a stupor I opened the door part way to find officer Gill and his large partner.

"Sorry to wake you Mr. Coupe but we've been called to investigate a complaint of vandalism on a vending machine." Officer Gill's eyes betrayed mirth, but if eyes are the telling of the soul, it was the big guy who was telling more. There was no warmth in those eyes, instead, the promise of violence that all too often accompanies racism. Even Bobby, my closest friend, admits to racism, especially with blacks.

"Why blacks?" I'd asked him.

"Prowess," he said, "physical and sexual." He told me about a time in Greece, when a group of black high school girls were giggling at naked statues. One asked, "Why are the penises so small?" Which made for hilarious laughter. Bobby talked about his high school football and basketball teams doing well until the playoffs when they played black teams from L.A. and Long Beach where they usually lost. The blacks were quicker and jumped higher. He and his friends dealt with it by calling them *jigaboos* and other things. I didn't think all of this standing in my doorway, but it was there.

Officer Gill persisted: "The camera in the hall shows the vandal is African American, and tonight Mr. Coupe, you are the only African American staying at the hotel. May we come in sir?"

Sometimes, when something's funny, it's best to not smile. Here were two cops, one of whom was definitely a cracker, probably both, but my thoughts weren't about them; instead I thought about Willie Nelson. More than likely, both these guys were fans like me, but I wasn't thinking about his music, I was thinking about Willie's

rules for life: *Breathe deep, and never miss an opportunity to shut the fuck up!*

“Am I under arrest?”

“Not at this time but we’d like to come to the law enforcement center to answer a few questions?” *Law enforcement center?* I thought. *Give me a fucking break!* Before answering, I took an unnoticed, deep breath.

“Unless I’m under arrest, I’m not going anywhere.”

Gill responded, “Then may we come in?”

“You may not,” I said.

“Then please step out into the hallway.”

I thought to myself, *LaSalle, don’t be stupid!*

“Unless I’m under arrest, you can ask your questions without me coming out and without you coming in.”

This was not said with one-step-removed as I now describe it—I was anxious and scared. I’m 230 pounds and six foot three, which didn’t match up with two, armed Wendover cops. The bigger one was my size, a lot younger and looking for some action. His partner Gill was just plain mean, accusing me of theft and vandalism, in a half-gambling, half-Mormon town, a place already at cross-purposes with itself, all because of no mustard, a loud vending machine, and three racists.

“Don’t get smart with me. You’re not wherever you live now,” said Gill.

“I’m not getting smart officer. Earlier tonight, had the clerk cared about customer service, he wouldn’t have made an issue over the mustard. Which makes me think this vending machine thing is happening because I’m black.”

The big guy jumped in: “What are you now, a lawyer?”

“That’s right,” I said. “I’m a criminal defense attorney. So tell me, are you accusing me of vandalism?” I was raising the stakes with the kind of bluff that can dig a deeper hole. But now I had to play it out.

“Someone shut the vending machine off, and the hall camera shows you reaching behind it,” said Gill.

“You’ve seen the video, officer?”

“No, but the desk clerk has and he confirmed you’re the only black, I mean African American at the hotel tonight.”

“I prefer black,” I said. “Officer Gill, unplugging a soda machine, are you thinking that’s a misdemeanor or a felony?”

“That’s not your concern,” he replied.

“Not my concern to ask what type of crime I’m about to be charged with?”

“It’s a misdemeanor,” he said matter-of-factly, taking a furtive glance at his partner.

“Does the video,” I asked, “the one you haven’t seen, show me unplugging the machine?”

“The camera shows you reaching behind the machine.”

“Yes, it does,” I said. “The machine wasn’t running and wasn’t cold, so I looked to see if it was plugged in, which it wasn’t, and my hand (I made a huge fist) couldn’t reach far enough behind to plug it back in. I’m assuming someone unplugged the machine, probably the guy who runs the vending route. Maybe it’s out of order. Anyway, I decided against a soda, you know, too much sugar’s not good for you. Anytime I remember, I don’t buy one. But that’s beside the point, because, as you know, under the law you can arrest someone for a felony you didn’t witness but misdemeanors must be witnessed by the officer.” I said nothing more.

“I need your ID again Mr. Coupe,” said Gill.

“I’ve already shown you my ID and the clerk made a copy of it when I rented the room. And since you’ve already run my license, and no crime’s been committed by me or anyone else, you don’t need to see my ID again. As officers of the law, I’m certain you’re aware that Nevada Hospitality Laws are designed to protect guests during interstate commerce, which means your actions constitute harassment.”

Gill looked at his partner.

“Let’s go Orvis.”

“Oh, we’ll go,” said Orvis, “but we’ll be back.”

My first inclination in a situation like this is to run. I'd broken Willie's main rule. I was good with the breathing that slowed things down, giving me time to think, but I didn't take the opportunity 'to shut the fuck up'. I seldom do. Presenting myself as a lawyer was stupid. Maybe a crime? Hastily, I packed the few things I'd unpacked and woke a sleepy Mercury. Taking only time to pee, we went out to the truck.

Wendover's basically one street and somewhere the boys were patrolling but they didn't know my truck. I headed through town, keeping below the speed limit, watching for the cruiser, and looking to get on the interstate until I remembered it was a few blocks before Nevada would become Utah. I continued along through East Wendover and soon merged with the interstate. I wanted to take Mercury out to the speedway. It would have to wait for another time.

Slivers of morning glanced off the salt flats, bringing a new day. I caught my first really deep breath, set the cruise for seventy-nine and headed for Salt Lake City.

"That's enough," said Tara. I stopped reading and looked at her.

"You're not black and you don't weigh 230 pounds. It's not interesting. It's too literal. There's not enough allusion or poetic sense. No one wants to read about small town cops, mustard, or unplugging a coke machine. And who the fuck wins Lotto America the same day his wife leaves him? Get real and write about what you know. I'm thinking black culture isn't it, unless you want your black man to be some middle class boredom. If you don't know anything, don't write. There's enough crap in the world without you adding to it! The poem's good. It made me think. I liked the music as religion. I don't mean to piss on your parade but it's what I think."

She headed back to the room. I finished my coffee. When she came back, with both our bags, I handed her a napkin on which I'd written with a borrowed pen:

continental divide

i've crossed her
so many times
i know her spine
like a lover
always the same thrill
as when first
i touched her
and felt her breath
on my face

now you and i
have crossed her
together
mingled
never to be the same

"Hmm," she said. "Telling—and beautiful."

"Telling?"

"That you'd include me in it after I was cruel about your story."

I laughed. "You need a map. We're a long way from the Continental Divide. This is gibberish scribbled on a napkin." She reddened and picked up her bag. I followed her out to the car.

"We've two choices," I said. "The Bonneville Speedway's a few miles from here. On the way, you can decide whether we take a quick look and head south, or maybe we'll see what this Ford can do?"

Rumbling through town in second gear, catching an occasional look, we crossed Interstate 80. Towards Salt Lake, I could almost see LaSalle and Mercury's tail lights fading out of my life.

3

Life is Trouble. Choose your trouble, or trouble will choose you.

"What'd you mean about honesty being hugely overrated?" she asked.

"Men and women are different. They want different things, so they've developed different strategies to get them."

"Such as?"

"Let me tell it in a story about Calvin Coolidge."

"Do I need to sit at your feet to hear it professor?" She was playing.

"The President was visiting a chicken farm with his wife."

"A chicken farm, how quaint, and until now, you're the first person I've met from the Coolidge era."

"They were walking around in two groups, Cal in one, his wife in the other. His wife, seeing roosters getting it on with the chickens, asked the guide, "Do they do that often?"

"Yes ma'am, often." Much to the enjoyment of the ladies in the group, she asked, "Would you mind telling that to my husband?"

Later, the guide told Cal, who thought on it a moment, then asked the guide, much to the entertainment of the men in his group, "Always with the same bird?"

"Seldom," said the guide.

"Would you mind telling that to my wife?"

Tara wasn't laughing now.

"Something in the story bothers you?" I asked, self indulgently.

"What are you saying? That men always want the newest bird?"

"Depends on the woman. Some women, old or young, with or without children, can neither be assumed nor taken for granted. But how many women do you know, who wouldn't trade what first attracted her to a man, for things in catalogues?"

"You piss me off! I think you tell the chicken story to justify the lost, unfulfilled desires of an old man."

"Unfulfilled maybe, but not lost girl. I know right where they are."

She got out to read the Speedway sign and I went out onto the salt, digging at it with my heel, wondering if it were dry enough for high speed this late in the season. Half a mile from the paved turn-around, maybe a dozen cars and twenty-five people were set up for racing. We drove out to the staging area and I explained how the course worked. From what I could see, the organized racing had wrapped up. This group would be the last for the year. It looked as if they still had three miles of groomed track with two timers, one at each end of the inside mile. I pointed out where a car would start at the beginning of mile one, reaching its top speed before triggering the first timer at the beginning of the inside mile. At the end of the timed mile the second timer would trigger. To complete the run, the driver needed to continue into mile three, turn around, and do it again. The average speed through the inside mile, coming and going, is the recorded speed. I began telling her about Art Arfons—how he went to the drag races one night and knew what he wanted to do for the rest of his life.

"I forgot," I said. "The two runs have to be made in the same hour."

"What'd he do with the rest of his life?" she asked, with a touch of irony, like a mother's interest in what her excited kid is telling her, but without the shared intensity.

"He showed up at the drag races a month later in a car he'd built, not a crowd pleaser, but powered by an aircraft engine. That night he broke the world record." Then I told how my dad, an engineer on the *Saturn* program, would get bogged down in an engineering problem and take it to Art, who would set the space program back on course with a pencil and a yellow pad. And about Art trading the Land Speed Record back and forth with Craig Breedlove's, *Spirit of America*, until Art crashed and rolled his *Green Monster*, promising his wife he would quit when she threat-

ened to leave him. And how for the next two years he worked on projects until one day she asked if the project he had scattered through the garages was a Green Monster? It was.

With his new *Monster*, he went to Bonneville. His first run was ten miles an hour above the record. He made the turn for the second run and drove back to the staging area with a frozen wheel bearing. He was done racing. There was more I wanted to say but a guy with a large red face was at Tara's window. She rolled it down and he introduced himself as Greg, asking how long she'd had the car? She said her dad liked to say he rode the City of New Orleans to Chicago, then on to Detroit, and picked her up. He asked whether the car came with sun visors? Tara gave me a wry look.

"And it has the police package, the smaller bucket seats," he said. "You know they did that for weight?" We didn't know but I told him I remembered when this car came out in 63 and a half.

"Close", he said, "This is a 64 Thunderbolt FE. The FE stands for Ford Edsel—Edsel Ford, one of Henry's sons. The way you can tell it's a 64 is the teardrop, bubble hood that was made special to clear the induction system."

He was really into this car, with too much information, and just warming to the subject. Poor Tara. First me and Art Arfons' flying mile, and now Greg.

"The two inner headlights were eliminated and replaced with air ducts that go directly to two, four barrel carburetors. It's a good guess though about this being a 63 and a half but the 427 high-rise engine in the 64 gives it another 20 horsepower, and the Borg-Warner four speed tranny, with the Hurst shifter tells us this car is one of eighty-nine, white, four-speed models, all two-doors with a post—what's called a pilloried coupe. If you wanted this engine, but not in a car, you could get it in a Chris Craft. Imagine what that must have been like? That boat could come right out of the water! The first eleven of these cars were maroon; the next eighty-nine were white and that's all of them. Sorry to keep on, but you do realize what you have here?" He didn't wait for the answer. "In its day, this was the fastest production racer ever made. They advertised it as: 'All you need to go racing is the ignition key.' Another

stroke of genius from Lee Iacocca, a VP at Ford. Later he became Ford president and developed the Mustang. A great businessman and visionary. He should have been President of the United States."

"How fast will it go?" asked Tara.

"Well," said Greg, "the record for this car in the flying mile is 207 miles an hour. Do you know about the flying mile?"

"Yeah," she said, giving a nod in my direction. "He explained it to me."

He, I thought. I don't rate an introduction.

"You think this car will do 207 miles an hour?" she asked.

"No, but if it's running well, it'll go over 170."

By now half a dozen people were around the car. One woman apologized for Greg's incessant talk about the Ford. It was his favorite car and he'd only seen a few. I asked if these Fords came out to Bonneville and Greg said they had, but now when they were so valuable, the owners didn't want to race them.

Sheepishly, Tara asked no one in particular, "How much is this car worth?"

"I'll tell you but you first have to agree to run the course." She agreed and Greg asked how many miles were on her?

"About 27,000." He looked stunned.

"The last I heard, the dollar range for the 64 is between 150 and 300 thousand, but I doubt there's one in this original condition with this few miles." Tara looked at me like she'd just won Lotto America. I smiled at the irony. Yeah sure, you drive out to the salt flats to find out the old car your dad left you is worth 300 grand.

"So, who's driving?" asked Greg." I answered quickly:

"Both! Me first, then Tara." She didn't object.

"Okay," said Greg. "There's a fifty dollar fee for each run but I'll make you a deal. You take the first run and she takes the second. If she beats you the second run is free."

Then she best beat me, I thought. It's a long way to New Orleans on ten dollars.

The woman who had apologized for Greg going on about the Ford, asked Greg, and seemingly the whole group, "What about Swamis? When's he getting back?"

"I think we have time," said Greg.

"Who's Swamis?" asked Tara.

"He's kind of in charge here. He has the permit for our group and we wouldn't be here without him."

"He wouldn't want us make the run?" Tara asked.

"He's a bit of a control freak," said Greg. "He likes to have everything go through him."

A blond-haired woman standing next to him said, "Careful Greg," with several in the group nodding assent.

Tara looked at me. "You wanna to do this?"

"Only if Swamis might show up during our runs, *cause I just loves authority figures.*" Tara smiled at my *Kingfish Stevens* imitation, with no idea who that was.

Greg pointed out where we would start and finish. Tara would ride shotgun on my run, but alone on hers. Since we didn't know anyone here we agreed to take the first run with everything in the trunk. I would watch our gear on the second.

"You thinking less weight gives me an advantage?" she asked.

"Maybe a mile or two an hour, but no worries mate; you won't win—with or without the baggage."

She turned the car around and came to a stop. I got out and walked around back of the car as she shifted from one bucket to the other. I called for her to come see. She knelt down beside me over the dried remains of a small sand crab who's shape was intact but empty, as if it had been shellacked and placed on the salt.

"How could it live out here?" I asked.

"Not well," she said. "It's dead."

We got back in and I clicked the seat belt, thankful her father had swapped out the lap belts for shoulder harnesses. Lap belts tend to cut you in half during a high speed crash.

"Don't wreck my car," she said, as I revved up and headed into the first mile. Soon I was in fourth at more than 100. A bit rough. Maybe she was out of alignment—maybe it was the salt? At 130, I

began to wonder if we would hit top speed before the measured mile. I quit looking at the speedometer and focused on the track. In my peripheral vision I saw the first timer go off. This was the fastest I'd ever driven and the car was unstable, sometimes drifting. Tara yelled, "That's it!" as the second timer fired. I slowly let off the gas. My head was sweaty. I rubbed salty tears out of my eyes.

"It's not that hot," she said.

"Yeah, I know and I don't want you to drive this course."

"Why are you saying that.? You thinking you're Art what's his name?"

"No, this salt isn't like asphalt, It rides like a motorcycle in gravel. It doesn't stick. I'm worried for you."

"Feel my forehead," she said. I did, it was dry. "Maybe old people get scared. I'm not going to miss this for anything. Maybe you're worried about me cause you know your shift from second to third cost you?" We pulled into the staging area and got out. Greg came over.

"Not bad, 169 miles an hour."

"Greg, the car was almost out of control. It was as if I were riding above the salt."

"It's the end of the season," he said, "and it rained yesterday, loosened everything up. A few days ago, when it was harder, you would have gotten another five miles an hour, so 169 is good."

"I don't want Tara to drive," I said. She was already at the trunk taking everything out. "The car's going to be even more squirrely without the weight!"

Tara called from the rear, "I believe this car belongs to me, and since I'm giving you a ride, I think you better watch and see how this is done."

"Okay Tara, but do something for me. Wear my helmet." She looked at me with a questioning smile that cut through her cynicism.

Before she could answer, Greg said, "Good idea, everyone's supposed to wear a helmet on the course." I went into the trunk and came back with a full-face helmet and a pair of black, elkskin riding gloves with no seams to rub against the thumbs. She looked at

the gloves and handed them back. I adjusted the chin strap on the helmet and helped her put it on. She got in and drove slowly out across the first mile, turned around, and sat there like a 767 waiting on ground control to clear her for takeoff.

From behind, I heard a loud vehicle and turned to see a black Ford pickup, F250 or 350, all decked out for off-road with too many roof lights, huge wheels with more ground clearance than necessary. All the cool shit, like headlight and radiator protectors, a gun rack, complete with military weapons, and on the passenger side, in front of the gun rack, what looked to be a pair of red and blue police lights. A dream truck for a teenager with more money than brains. It skidded to a halt ten feet from my gear and even closer to Greg.

Tara accelerated. Turning back to watch her, my eyes took in the lettering on the door. Halliburton. The driver slid out and came towards us fast, maybe forty-five years old, better than 200 pounds, and not happy.

"What the fuck's going on here?" he demanded of Greg.

"It's a 427 Swamis. We wanted to see what it would do."

"Who the fuck are you?" he demanded of my 145 pound, sixty-seven year-old self. I didn't stop watching Tara but I did back away enough to where I could also watch him.

"Me? I'm the guy hoping nothing bad happens to that young woman out there. But first I have to ignore the rude asshole in the pimped-out pickup!"

He looked at me through the sadistic, competitive smile of someone who might chuckle at those words from a buddy, over shots of brandy, but not from a stranger, and not in front of his group. The cruelty in his eyes quickly froze the smile. He covered half the distance between us in two steps, which was just enough time for me to get a hand into my waist pack. His eyes were savage, much worse than the Wendover cops and my preservation instinct told me *to shut the fuck up*.

"You carrying?" he demanded.

"Why, you a cop?"

"You best have a fucking permit for Nevada," he said, as Greg yelled, "177 miles an hour!" to subdued cheers from the women, but Swamis was unrelenting.

"Show me your concealed weapons permit now!"

"You a cop?" I asked again, adjusting my grip but keeping the weapon unseen. Acting like it was beneath him to produce ID, he pulled out his wallet, flipped open an ID for Homeland Security and held it up for me to see.

"You sensing some national security risk with her out there on the course?" I asked.

"You best show me that permit before you find yourself in military custody."

"Would you be arresting me as Halliburton, or Homeland Security? Wait, aren't they the same?"

"Last chance," he said, and he meant it. I one-handed through my wallet and held up my Oregon permit to carry—with my smiling picture. I held it close enough for him to read.

"Hand it to me!" he barked.

"You didn't hand me yours."

"Do what I tell you now!" he demanded.

"No thanks."

"You can't carry in Nevada with an Oregon permit. Oregon doesn't offer reciprocity. I'm arresting you."

"No way." I said. "Those are state laws and you have no jurisdiction." I wanted to stop but I can't back down from tyrants. Besides, I was in the right. This asshole was the real threat to national security.

Tara rolled up near us and got out of the car. She took off the helmet, shook out her hair and smiled at Swamis. While he was looking at her, I put a vertical forefinger to my lips. He looked back at me.

"I need that weapon and I need to place you in custody while we wait for the state police."

"You can't put me in custody. I haven't broken any federal law."

"Just watch," he said, starting for me.

This was going to be about power and not the rule of law, so I backed away.

"I have a carry permit for Nevada." I handed my wallet to Tara asking her to find my Arizona, nonresident, carry permit, and hold it up for Swamis to read but not to touch. Thankfully I had it, because it conveyed reciprocity. Swamis looked pissed but relieved at the same time. Like a bully saved from beating someone in an awkward social situation.

He spoke to Tara, "Somebody better tell your boyfriend, or your grandad here that this country is at war and Americans are expected to cooperate."

I shot back, "What a concept! We're at war, with no one in particular, and since we're being co-opted—we best cooperate!"

Tara spoke clearly and loudly over me.

"He's neither my boyfriend nor is he my grandfather."

"That shows social and genetic sense on your part because he just pulled a gun on a federal officer."

"I don't see a gun," she said.

I panned the faces of the group. We'd get no help there. Tara read it clearly and focused on Swamis.

"You know, I just made my first Bonneville run, at 177 mph. I'm a bit shaky and whatever this misunderstanding is, you ought to be a gentleman and offer me a beer." It was obvious he was taken with her.

"Good idea," he said, "I could use a break from this little character." I laughed.

"What's funny?" he demanded.

"We're not in Nevada. We're in Utah and my Oregon carry permit's good in Utah."

He walked to the back of the pickup, grabbed a cooler, motioning Tara to join him. They walked towards a metal picnic table, most likely hauled out to the salt flats by someone from the group. When they were out of earshot (and the group had headed back to their cars and tents, like extras from *The Invasion of the Body*

Snatchers), Greg said, "Let me give you some friendly advise. You best back off. You have no idea who you're dealing with."

"I'm getting an idea," I said.

"He's not as bad if you don't go up against him. If you do there's no mercy and he has more power than you know. He spent five years in Iraq and Afghanistan with Blackwater and he misses it. When I ask him what he misses he says it's too complicated here. There, whatever comes up, you just deal with it."

"You mean it's complicated here by things like the 'Bill of Rights'—*the rule of law*?"

"That may be, but your attitude puts you and her at risk. Big risk! I've been around Swamis since we were kids and each time he comes back from the Middle East he's less the person I knew. Most of these people have known him a long time. When he invites them, they don't decline. They come for a couple of days and keep their mouths shut. Even as his closest friend I'm not immune to his wrath. His attitude towards women is worse. As soon as you see an opportunity, get out of here!" I fished out a business card from my wallet then headed for the Ford wanting the keys to be in it so I could load the gear. I turned back to Greg.

"Thanks man!"

"Don't thank me. I'm doing this as much for him and me as I am for you two."

"Where'd he get the name Swamis?"

"His name is Paul Don. Says he got the name Swamis from surfing Camp Pendleton in the Marine Corps but the years he spent in Oregon as a devotee of some Indian guru. I'm not sure about the name."

The keys were on the front seat so I loaded the gear and locked it where it sat. Some Indian guru? He was talking about Bhagwan Sri Rajneesh, who came to Oregon in the seventies, persuading thousands of people to join his cult, trading their earthly wealth for free love, a full time, hard-labor job, and a new name. With his new-found wealth he bought the Big Muddy Ranch out by Antelope. The devotees, *sanyasins*, worked endless hours to build a secure

compound, a hotel, and other buildings. What they saved on labor bought more than 100 Rolls Royce's for the Bhagwan. *Simple man, simple dream?* The same kind of people who joined Scientology joined the Rajneesh, except the *neeshies* may have been even less bright—though both groups shared a common inability to think for themselves. I was amazed how many people bought into the whole deal? For a while, Ashland seemed the epicenter of the movement. People I knew, joined, like Vicki, a cute, easy-going waitress, who became head of security for what became Rajneeshpuram. One photo stays with me. Vicki by a security fence with a fully automatic weapon. Then there's another story of a guy called Swamis, the only devotee to beat the Bhagwan out of money; the only one to beat him at his own game.

I looked over to the picnic table and saw they were on their second beer. Shit, was Tara going to be taken in by this asshole who fit her older man criteria? With nothing to do and no one to talk to, I walked out across the salt towards the mountains, far in the distance, practicing what the Buddhists call *shikantaza*, emptying the mind into cloudless sky. When thoughts came up, I watched them dissipate and fall away. When I couldn't let go of thoughts, I reminded myself that all activity takes place on a bed of emptiness, refocusing on the clear blue light of the *Dharma-Kaya*. Just the sound of my shoes on salt—nothing more. That, and my breath, which slowed and deepened. I walked hard for maybe twenty minutes until I began to feel lighter. Turning back, Tara was coming towards me, maybe half the distance from the car. As she approached, I stopped, wondering if we would be driving to New Orleans?

"He's the most dangerous and terrifying man I've ever met," she said. "He's insisting we stay for dinner and spend the night. I don't know all you said to him but he hates you and I wouldn't want to be you right now."

"I wouldn't want to be you either. That guy wants what he can get from you and chivalry's not gonna stand in his way."

"Bad as that is," she said, "I'd rather be me than you!"

"What do you want to do?" I asked.

"What I want is for you to stop confronting him so we can get out of here. I don't want to have to buy our freedom and I'm going to be hugely pissed if your badmouthing puts us in an even worse place. If you can't shut up, you're gonna be in a military prison or an intensive care ward—*or worse*. And from what I'm seeing, *or worse*, is a distinct possibility!"

The shadows of the mountains behind us, grew long, outpacing us as we walked towards the Ford where Swamis was leaning against a fender.

"Tara tells me I'm reading you wrong," I said. "I suppose my being partial to the Second Amendment makes me react instead of thinking things through. I took a walk and thought about what you said. The world's a mess and Homeland Security's been empowered to make us secure." I stuck my hand out. "Maybe we can do like kids and start over."

"I won't be disrespected," he said, "but because you're older, and sensing your loss of power, just this one time." He took my hand and crushed it. I thought about the old Italian in *Catch 22*, who first applauded the Fascists, then shouted approval for the Nazis, finally cheering the Americans. Like him, I accepted the pain. I didn't react.

Swamis walked with Tara towards the picnic table where a few people were setting up food and drinks. I headed in the same direction, slowly, remembering a time down in Sunset Beach when a friend and I got into a discussion with a boat builder, who was building a cement boat. They were all the rage back then. The guy was big, with thick wrists, heavy shoulders and neck, probably bigger than Swamis, and younger. He was telling us about having taken LSD a few days before, which had been a horrifying experience, accompanied by powerful desires to kill. Fool that I was, and am, I said, "Yeah, that LSD brings out our deepest fears and insecurities." He looked at me—astonished!

"Let's stop right there!" he said. I looked at him in wonder?

"We're going to work this out right here and right now, and nobody's going anywhere until we do. Are you saying what happened to me on LSD is about me and not because of a drug?"

I tap-danced away from what I'd said, "Well I don't know much about it, never having done it. All I know is what I read in the Reader's Digest. And what do those lamers know?"

"Your fuckin right you don't know," he said, still shaken from his bad trip, and weighing my explanation against his self-doubt and fear.

That memory was a bad one for me but not as bad as the prospect of heading into the night with Swamis—another guy that wouldn't be able to come up with a memory when his parents loved him. Unlike the boat builder, Swamis's a hired killer, living out a grotesque, ongoing hallucination, deepened by successive acts of inhumanity—each fully sanctioned by the U.S. Empire. Lately I've been thinking that *the difference between psychotics and neurotics is that neurotics have problems.*

The picnic table seated four so most everyone brought camp chairs to dinner, one of which Greg handed to me, reminding me it would be better if I didn't sit near Swamis. I set my chair at the end of the table, opposite where Tara and Swamis sat across from each other. Two men were busy making a fire in a round metal ring on the salt, which was soon going nicely. Daylight faded and a couple of gas lamps were lit. I reminded myself that I do well talking with people from different political persuasions, maintaining a friendly rapport (but so often I forget the two things one doesn't talk about at dinner, religion and politics). Tara shot me a look of reproach, combined with admonition, anticipating an event that hadn't yet occurred.

"Swamis, will you tell me your thoughts on the Second Amendment?" Here, I was certain we had common ground.

"Sure," he said, condescendingly. "It had a place in our early history because we had to take our country from the British and protect ourselves from wild animals and Indians. That's no longer the case. We're in an unending war with terrorists and it's the mis-

sion of the police and military to provide security for the people. Guys like you, going around with concealed weapons, makes security more difficult, if not impossible."

"Interesting you mention *security*," I said. "The only place the word appears in the Constitution is in reference to keeping the people *secure* from government, not the other way around."

"Like I said," he said, "things are different now with global terrorism, and your antiquated right to bear arms gets in the way of professionals. Besides, the Second Amendment calls for a *well-regulated militia*. That's the National Guard."

"No way!" I said. "The intent of the Bill of Rights doesn't change with the times. The fear was of government, of a standing army subjugating the people. The well-regulated militia are the citizens, not controlled by the government, but controlling government. American towns had armories where the arms were kept and could be gotten quickly, when needed. That's the *well-regulated militia*! Jefferson said we should use the Second Amendment, every so often, to take down the government."

"That's treason!" cursed Swamis.

"How can it be treason? He was a founder. He wrote the damn thing? The real reason for disarming the people is to get rid of a vocal, armed population standing between government and total power. It's just another way to rationalize a coup being brought against the Constitution?"

The salt flats had wrapped the night in silence. Tara looked at me as she might look at a man who had come to ask for her hand in marriage, then shot her mother while waiting for her father's blessing.

Swamis stared at me as if down a long, cold tube.

"I think I'll go to the car and read awhile," I said. "Maybe get some sleep."

He said nothing and I headed for the car. I heard him saying to Tara that he had a large tent with plenty of room for her. This wasn't like the lunches I have with Todd, who calls himself a libertarian, but sends money to conservatives. When I'm making a difficult point with Todd, I sometimes put a hand on his arm. Swamis

might kill me if I touched him. Swamis's no conservative. Conservatives don't trust government. They support the Second Amendment. Swamis is more like Democrats who close their eyes and turn in their guns. Then he's no Democrat either. Democrats have hearts. Politically, he's of the tyrant class. He's an old-school slaver of the power elite. A cold shudder ran down my spine.

I sat in the car listening to country music from Wendover until I fell asleep, from which I was shocked into waking by the crazed reality of Tara opening the driver's door and pushing me roughly towards the passenger seat, which I clawed my way into. I wasn't awake nor had I slept enough to allow dreams to sort my emotions—which left me stupefied. Tara rolled up her window, locked her door and started the engine.

"Lock your fucking door!" she screamed, turning on the headlights and spinning tires across the salt.

Now I was awake, looking back for headlights. There were none. Tara was driving like a woman possessed, wound out in second gear, out of control, in soft salt, heading in a different direction than we came in. She was becoming more frenzied by the second. I grabbed her by the hair and made her stop the car. I opened my door, dragging her to the passenger seat as I got out. I locked and closed her door and ran around the front, sliding into the driver's seat, all the while scanning for a vehicle with or without headlights. In seconds we were back in the tracks then squealing across the paved turnaround. I kept watch but he couldn't catch us now—not in this car. We made a hard left towards the interstate, the gas gauge showing low. We had burned almost a full tank since Winnemucca, most of it trying to go 200 miles an hour. I told Tara we needed gas and she began to shake. I took her hand. I told her she was safe. That I would kill the asshole to protect her. I didn't feel safe.

I drove into Wendover, crossed back into Nevada to the casino we had stayed at the night before. I drove behind the casino through the *Employees Only* driveway, remembering how Tara didn't like my LaSalle story because it was about mustard and

vending machines because it was too mundane. I wondered did she like this one better?

I parked in a space that hid the car from view. I was quite willing to take the heat for having parked in an employee spot. Tara jumped out and stood by the car, still shaking. I went around and held her. She stammered, "We don't need to take anything in. Let's just get inside." I kept holding her.

"Go easy Tara. Get what you need for the bathroom, your wallet and passport." To sound in control, I said, "I never go to a cheap hotel without my pillow."

She got her things from the glove box and back seat, while I opened the trunk for my bathroom kit and pillow. We locked up and went inside.

I lay in bed watching Piers Morgan, then the Red Eye goofballs on Fox, while Tara showered. I thought she might shower. Women sense that bad emotional experiences need to be washed off. She came out of the bathroom and I turned off the TV. She went between the beds and got into mine. I lay on my back, my head on a feather pillow, waiting for her to say something.

"I'm way too scared to sleep alone. Even being with the idiot who almost got us killed tonight..." She began sobbing. I held her until she fell asleep then turned back to my pillow shifting the weapon away from her.

4

Within taboos, there are taboos.

Tara was still asleep. My first impulse was to wake her up and go, but remembering how scared she was last night I decided to stick to my normal routine. Anything normal would be good for her. During one set of pushups she looked across at me then went back

to sleep. When she woke up, I was ready to go. She seemed better than the night before.

Soon we were getting gas, almost sixteen gallons for 233 miles. I took out my iPhone to figure the mpg, 14.5. Not too bad. We might even get 16, not racing. I didn't say anything to her but I wanted off the interstate at our first chance. We'd be safer on secondary roads. I remember fantasizing, after a marathon of Sopranos episodes, that if the mob were ever after me I would live on a secondary road off another secondary road. Odds were, the fun we'd had with Swamis was now just a bad memory but I didn't want to take chances. Without sharing my thoughts, I got on 93 South to Ely. I'd been over these roads on four wheels and on two wheels. This high desert usually catches me up in its beauty but I wasn't seeing it now.

Tara asked me, "Are you surprised he didn't come after us?"

"A little, but with his personality, run-ins like last night are probably the norm." I didn't believe it but I said it. He wouldn't find many women like Tara, or men to take him on, the way I did. Remembering it hadn't been long since she was out of control, I stayed back from things that might raise her anxiety.

"Were you scared?" she asked.

"Not after we hit the paved road. When we were squirreling around on the salt, a little, but once I heard pavement, we were in control."

"You feel more confident on pavement?"

"Yeah, no, I mean, this car's made for asphalt; his 4x4 is better off-road."

"You did good on the salt once you took over from me."

"I probably don't have the kind of off-road experience he has, and his truck's set up for it." I told her about crossing the Andes with my friend Francisco, who's twenty-five years younger, with decades of off-road experience. One morning we came to a road, more like a goat path, made of softball-sized rocks. We were riding these new BMW off-road bikes. I asked if she wanted to hear what I'd written about it? She did. I found a place to pull over. She got

into the driver's seat while I fetched my MacBook from the trunk.
She pulled back onto 93 South and I read to her:

asfalto o pavimento

a good sleep
a small breakfast
a paved road to bariloche
then 40 km of gravel
a bit rough
crossing pebbled creeks
the road worsens
cisco rides motocross
with a full tank of fangio xxl
he chases llamas
across the pampas
while I suffer
the road narrows
to a trail of round rocks
the size of softballs
"how do we ride this?"
"*berri* fast"
he laughs

a great lunch in bariloche
buffet, steak, chicken, everything
café con leche
lots of azucar
a busload of kids come in
"how old are you?" I ask
14 she says
i smile
my son is 14

the road to escuel
300 km

ruta 40
incredible!
long graceful windings
asfalto o pavimento
120 km
cisco picks it up
130km
move over steve mcqueen
140 km
move over malcolm smith
a big rig in the roadway
cisco hesitates to pass
i whip by him
220 km
move over cisco
I am this road
I am this bike

“I like it,” she said. “Guys are amazing—so competitive.”

“This poem is about about equality,” I said.

“Not really,” she said. “This is a poem about getting even, exacted by an older guy on a skilled, younger guy. You know what they say about revenge, *a dish best served cold.*”

“But Tara, I really love Cisco.”

“Even better, a love story about getting even and boys doing what they do best.”

At Ely we filled up. I didn't know if we'd find gas before the interstate and we couldn't make it on one tank. This trip was going to cost way more than the \$400 I was paying for a ride to New Orleans. Then we were back on the two-lane, high desert road, down through Pinoche and Alamo, long stretches without cars coming north. Around four in the afternoon we reached Interstate 15 and headed south to Vegas. When I could see the MGM Grand we exited for the parking garage. Nice thing about Vegas, the food and rooms can be inexpensive and parking at the casinos is free be-

cause they want you to park, eat, sleep, and gamble away your money at their place. Once parked, I asked Tara what she wanted to do?

“Walk, I want to see as much as I can. See what the big deal is?”

I didn't tell her but that's what I do whenever I'm here. I'm not interested in gambling. That's low-end drama, and I don't drink much. We walked and talked but mostly we walked and took in what was going on around us. Since I'd been here so many times I let her decide where to go. She walked us through casinos she'd heard of and some she hadn't. We watched the fountains go off at the Bellagio, saw the Italian place with the gondolas and the one with the Eiffel Tower. After a couple of miles, the Strip began to fade into older downtown and we headed back. Passing the Imperial Palace I remembered the car collection and headed us in that direction. We stopped by the concierge desk to get free tickets with my AAA card and took the elevator up.

Most of the collection is for sale so it slowly changes over time. I'd been here in the past few months but I wanted her to see it. For most of an hour we walked down the rows of vehicles: Johnny Carson's boyhood Mercury, Howard Hughes' Lincoln, and Tony Soprano's Suburban. Some cars, completely original, others restored, and out of more than 100 cars, a few, maybe more than a few, having the simple elegance and economy of scale usually reserved to describe women.

Tara had a call to make. We put each other's numbers in our phones and I walked out to the Strip to call my wife. First I checked messages. There was nothing that couldn't wait. Then I checked email, an Obama rant from my gold dealer, check-ins from other friends and some updates from the *New York Times*.

One I didn't recognize, which I was about to delete when I saw the name Greg. The only Greg I knew was out on the salt flats? I opened it.

“Alex, I'm not sure it's a good idea to send this but you need a heads up. You probably think you're done with Swamis but you're not. Nobody makes him look bad, not the way you did, and gets

away with it. It's worse because of Tara. He's convinced she's the woman he's been looking for. That puts you at greater risk because you're with her. He thinks nothing of using his power to go after anyone who confronts him. There's no place he can't find her. There's probably a tracking device on your car. Assume it's there, but he doesn't need it because he has every police and military resource at his disposal. You and Tara are in danger and nothing will stop him. You should get away from her because he'll be coming. Please delete this message after you show it to Tara, then delete it from your trash. I feel certain he would harm the messenger."

I was set back but not surprised. My cell phone rang, it was Tara. I walked back knowing I wouldn't abandon her to Swamis. I thought back three years, when I'd ridden a motorcycle, alone, from Inuvik, the northernmost town in Canada, to Ushuaia, the southernmost city in the world, on Tierra Del Fuego. I knew it might be dangerous. Even with my Marine Corps fighting knife in my waist pack, I kept reminding myself I had chosen to be there, and whatever happened, I needed to deal with it. Things did happen. One night in Lima, in a badly lit part of town, I'd gotten off my bike when three young punks approached me, two with hoods and a third with gold teeth and some kind of metal knuckles. They didn't come right at me. Instead, the knuckles guy said, in English, "You got money?" I leaned my body to where the handlebars and mirrors were between me and him and in the same motion came up with my knife. I spoke to him in Spanish.

"No, but I have this and I'm not afraid, so bring it." They made jokes about me being old and loco, but they left.

"Is there anything else you want from Vegas?" I asked.

"No, there's nothing here. Why, what are you thinking?"

"Maybe down to Primm for the night, then a day or two in Death Valley."

"What's Primm?" she asked.

"Primm's on the Nevada-California border, three casinos with good cheap rooms to entice Los Angelinos to not drive the other forty miles to Vegas."

"And why Death Valley?"

"Because this time of year it's usually over 100, but these next three days are forecast in the high 80's. Besides, it's one of the wonders of the world."

"What about New Orleans and your bike?"

"Not a problem. You really think Vegas is nothing?"

"It's not nothing. The experience was worth it. It's just that there's not much here for me."

Damn, I thought. Why do I have to be more than thirty years older than this woman, and married?

Perplexed and feeling the beginnings of attachment, I needed something different to talk about.

"Tell me about your family Tara." I said, pulling out of the MGM garage and heading to the interstate.

"Not one of my favorite topics."

"It's a long way to Louisiana and I'm wondering about you? Your dad obviously loved you, leaving you the car and his other things. So, with that kind of dad, where did you get the dark side?"

"What do you mean?" she asked with suspicion.

"You have an edge and an attitude, which not qualities of someone who grew up in a loving home—especially a woman."

"What the fuck do you know about it?"

"I know because I have more experience with it than you do. I grew up in a troubled family. My mother ratted me out daily to a violent, alcoholic father who hesitated only slightly before beating me and my brother as if we were men."

"How come you seem mostly sane?" she asked.

"It hasn't been easy. Being the oldest child, I got just enough love from my parents, combined with my curiosity, to have a fighting chance. My brother had less of a chance, and my sister... It's been hard for my sister."

"Where did you grow up?" she asked.

"Montreal the first five years, Toronto until I was twelve, then we moved to Southern California. My dad was a draftsman and we moved to the jobs. My parents were there for me but not with any consistency. I couldn't trust or count on either of them. My father

was an after-dark drinker. He never went to bed sober, but he always went to work in the morning. I got his work ethic. I was insecure, shy with girls. Instead of facing who I was, I lived in fantasy. I was twenty-one, two years out of the Navy, before I thought I had a chance. But I had to get out of Southern California. When I moved away, I couldn't blame my parents any more. Now, I was the problem. What about you Tara? Where did you grow up?" For a few seconds, she weighed something.

"New Orleans. I grew up in New Orleans. I'm an only child."

"Is your mom still alive?"

"No, they're both gone."

"What did your parents do?"

"My dad was a college professor and my mother was a shrew bitch!"

"Quite an indictment! What was she like?" Talking about her family upset her and she spoke, looking straight ahead.

"There was never anything for me—it was all about her. Everything, all the attention, all the stuff. I don't know why she bothered to have me?" I wondered if Tara had been a planned event?

"She would put me down, shame me. There was nothing I could do about it."

"What about your father? What would he do when she treated you that way?"

"He wouldn't do anything while it was happening. He didn't want to make things worse between them. Later, he'd find a time to come and tell me he loved me."

"What about things? Did you have the things a kid needs to fit in?"

"No, there was never enough money for things I wanted. But there was always enough for my mother."

"Your dad was all right with that?"

"Like I told you, he would talk to me later, sometimes buy me something she didn't know about."

"Do you have more of your things stashed someplace?"

"Nope, what you see is what you get." I smiled. "What's funny?" she asked.

"Nothing really. Just thinking about the women I know living out of one bag? How'd you know your dad loved you?"

"What do you mean?" she said with some force. "I told you. He would wait until things calmed down..."

"You mean," I cut her off, "when there was no threat to him from your mother? Until he felt safe, he'd watch his daughter emotionally shamed, then later say something to her. Maybe buy her a little something?"

"What the fuck are you saying? You saying he didn't love me?"

"I'm saying you feel the need to save this image of your father. It's all you have. But he wasn't there for you when you desperately needed his protection."

"You know," she said, "you're smart—you see things. But you'd learn a lot more if you listened instead of asking so many fucking questions!" She fired a couple more broadsides at my integrity and motivation. Which pissed me off and I came back at her:

"Tara, it's a good thing I'm an older, experienced man, because somebody taught you how to shame real good. You'd tear a new asshole on a younger man. But I'm not him and I won't take your shit. You're angry because your mother didn't love you and your father only loved you when it didn't count. And when you see it, you can't deal with it because you'd have to admit you're alone. Because you can't admit it, you protect a lie and when you're confronted with it, whoever's in front of you had better look out. I see it Tara, because I've lived it. Because I'm living it right now. This is no fucking dress-rehearsal! This is real and the stakes are high. People like us, from messed-up families, are running a race between consciousness and separation—a race we usually lose! I abandoned my first child with hardly a thought. Now he wants nothing to do with me. But for my younger son, who's seventeen, I've been there every step of the way, without violence, without drunkenness. When he doesn't pay any attention to me I can deal with it because I'm proud of the father I've been. And, if I had a daughter like you, no one would ever, and I mean ever, shame you. You wouldn't be thirty-five years old, living out of a bag, with ten

dollars in your pocket, going back to New Orleans, for god know's what?"

Through murky emotions, I barely saw the lights at Jean and then Primm before pulling off I-15 towards Terrible's Casino and the Primm Valley Casino and hotel. I pulled into the lot and parked, not where I usually park, far away from other cars so no one can open a door on my ride. Instead, I parked closer to the casino with cars on either side, safer in the herd mentality. I turned off the ignition and sat there.

"Are we okay?"

"I don't know, are we?" she asked.

"All depends?" I said. "Whether we see each other as someone who cares or just reacts?"

"I think you care but I think you're cruel!"

There were more people in line than usual, which meant someone famous was playing in the Star of the Desert Arena. I asked the woman in front of us if she knew who was here. "No one tonight but tomorrow *Hag's* here." Damn, Merle Haggard, it doesn't get better than that. When we reached the front of the line I asked the desk clerk, a short, thick, black woman, who had probably dealt with 100 people in the last three hours, how her night was going? It's something I do, at fast food places—anywhere. Service jobs are hard work and the people behind the counter appreciate somebody caring about them.

"It's good. Two more hours and I'm done," she said, with a laugh that lit up the whole lobby. I asked about a room? There were two left, one nonsmoking, which we rented at a higher rate than usual. The music crowd drives up the prices. I told her we were a huge fans of Merle and asked about tickets. She made a call. Surprisingly, there were a few.

"But no rooms tomorrow night, honey—completely booked." I asked if she would be working the next day? "Like today honey, I'll be in at ten."

After finishing check-in and paying for the tickets, I handed her twenty dollars.

"What's that for?" she asked.

"That's for treating us good, for that laugh of yours, for having a nonsmoking room, for finding tickets to Merle, and for maybe, just maybe, tomorrow morning you'll get a cancellation and you'll remember we need a room." She took the twenty, drawing a happy face on our paperwork. She smiled at Tara, then at me.

"You married?" she asked. It wasn't a question—just a sweetness.

5

Those of us who were around in the 50's, and grew up in the 60's, have, as constant companions, thousands of song lyrics, most of which we first heard through a four inch speaker. But, as a writer, I can't use any of those lyrics without the permission of transnational corporations. Ain't that a shame?

One trend for motel rooms is the kind of curtains that mute light but don't block it, making me squint into bright morning and get up. When Tara got up I was watching a YouTube someone had posted of the Beatles doing their Ed Sullivan appearance. She'd seen it—not live of course. This day was looking better, the Beatles on Ed Sullivan, no Swamis, no shrew bitch mothers, no violent fathers. Instead we were laughing and talking. I needed to tell her about the email from Greg, but not today. This was a day-off and tonight we were going to a concert. I sat up with my legs on the floor facing her.

"Can I kiss you, Tara?"

"No!" she said, with a squeal and we both laughed.

"Tara, can I come over there and kiss you, just once?"

"Just once?" she asked, sitting up.

"Just once." I took her silence as a yes and moved to sit on her bed. I put a hand on her cheek, cupped her face with both hands and kissed her. It was a good kiss and she responded. I wanted to hold her but that wasn't part of the deal. After the kiss, there were little kisses, interspersed with laughs.

"You said one kiss."

"Those little ones don't count. Those are after kisses." I got back in my bed and pulled the covers over my head. "I think this is a good time for you to take a shower and get dressed," I said.

Primm's a place where you can take a good walk without going outside. We walked through the casino to where it narrows to a walkway, maybe twenty yards wide, then expands into an outlet mall of Williams-Sonoma, Nike, Victoria's Secret, type of stores. The whole thing's built in a circle such that you end up where you started. Tara wanted to look in shops but I prevailed that we walk first. After three times around I said I'd go back to the room while she shopped.

"But Tara, aren't you hungry?"

"Not yet. There's good stores here and I want an hour to look around." I thought about her having no money.

"I know I can't buy anything. Mostly I just like to look."

I said I'd see her back at the room and headed in that direction. She was a curious mix, wanting time to check out the stores, while Vegas with all it's fashion shops held nothing for her. Once in the room, I went straight for my MacBook and wrote.

it's not fear and loathing
is it?

east coast reality
rubbed up against vegas
atlantic city
mecca of the fifties

a theme park
gussied up
like some old whore
riding in the front seat
but not for long
she gave it away too many times
out behind the bumper cars
new boys
strut the boardwalk
in tight white tees
combing back greased black hair
into cresting waves
hood ornament testimonials
to the throbbing power in their jeans
they look at her with derision
as if donald trump
had showed up
with his comb-over

wikipedia gets it wrong
about hunter thompson's
big hill outside vegas
from which he could see where the wave of the 60s
broke and never reached the neon city
they say he was writing about acid
fuck that
acid was a tactic in hunter's strategy
he was all about politics and
the 60's was politics
the politics of us against the politics of me
the politics of we
against the politics of greed
and we lost
so now it's gonna roll over you brother
you can't duck it
but the shame's not yours

that belongs to vegas
the poster child
for a failed human experiment
a marker for the end of a civilization
we knew
where boys turned into donkeys
inviting girls up to their rooms
now they come from ukiah
and hopland
drunk
crying at neon
over slim-hipped girls
for whom they can't buy
the american dream
they walk night streets
staring at marquees
selling engelbert humperdinck
and carrot top
they sense the next attraction
coming to the strip
a vegas-style housing bust
played out this time
with hotels and casinos
where the formerly square-heeled
desperately sell off
foreclosed high rises
with brown lawns
and slimy pools

vegas
you think chinese money
will make you flush
give you a full house
instead your casinos will go dark
and the little brown guys
offering snap cards

a girl to your room in 20 minutes
will outnumber tourists
contending with homeless for the sidewalk
where rick harrison's pawn shop
is the main attraction
then you'll know fear
no longer loathing
the wave you might have ridden

I finished just as I heard her card in the door. She came in upbeat.

"You wrote something?"

"A poem about Vegas."

"Let me read it!"

"I don't know? It's not happy like you. Maybe it'll bring you down?"

"Bullshit, nothing's bringing me down today. I wanna read it."

"Do you want coffee?"

"Sure," she said, not looking up from my poem. I left her and headed for Starbucks where I ordered two cappuccinos. While the gal was making them, I grabbed part of a *USA Today* and walked out to the car. Starting at the back of the car, I put down some paper to kneel on and twisted my body to see up into the undercarriage, into the frame and axels. I was looking for something that might be a tracking device. Then, I knelt against a rear wheel, reaching behind it, feeling for the frame. Nothing on the driver's side. I needed to get back for the coffee. On the passenger side I reached for the frame and there it was. It took a surprising pull to break it's hold. Whoever made it wanted it to stay in place. It wasn't big, maybe the size of a hard pack of cigarettes. I thought about leaving it beside the car until we left but it would continue to track. I looked around for a rock to smash it but there was nothing.

I was thinking I might jump on it and break it when I saw two big dudes in cowboy hats coming from the casino. Getting closer, they angled left to a large 4x4 right behind the Ford. They got in and I scurried behind them like Richard Dreyfus in *American Graffiti*, where he attaches a cable around the rear axles of a cop car—

with the cop in the car. The other end he secures to a thick post. How stupid I must look, but I was safe, at least until the engine started. I scooted to the passenger side as he was less likely to be looking in the mirror. I placed the tracker behind the right rear wheel just as the engine fired up and the back-up lights came on, giving me just enough time to duck behind the car next to them. There was a loud crack when they backed over it. "What the fuck was that?" asked the driver.

Once they'd gone, I went to see if the truck had done its job. The tracker looked as if it had been smacked with a nine-pound maul. "How's that work for you Swamis?" I muttered, brushing what was left onto the *USA Today*. Walking back to the casino, I recalled the rest of the scene where Richard Dreyfus and the car club punks, in their chopped Mercury, drive by the cop yelling and hanging out the windows. The cop takes off after them, leaving behind his rear end and wheels cabled to the post. Surely every teenage boy's prayer!

Back at the room Tara asked, "Where've you been?" I couldn't help it and started to laugh.

"Why are you laughing?"

"Nothing." I said, laughing more. "No, not true, but can I tell you tomorrow? Please don't ask me. I promise to tell you on the way to Death Valley. Want your coffee? I got cappuccinos."

"That sounds great, but I'm starved. Let's drink it on the way out to the car for the food."

"We're not going to the car for food," I said. "When we're out in the desert, fine, but when we're in civilization or we need more than a snack. We need to eat like regular people."

We walked back through the casino into the outlet mall. At the far end there's a Korean food stand where I go when I'm here. I swear to god I find myself at Primm three or four times a year, along with Palm Springs, Vegas, Death Valley, Wendover, and San Clemente. I go home for a month, maybe a month and a half, then I need the road again.

Tara saw they made fresh juice and wanted one, so we ordered two apple-carrots and a couple of turkey and swiss wraps, warmed in the oven. While the Korean woman prepared our food, I bantered with her about my time in Korea, which she liked hearing about. She said I needed a Korean wife. I was doing well. In the space of twelve hours, I'd been proposed to by a black woman, persuaded to find a Korean wife, and kissed Tara. Only one of the three mattered.

A big couch with a small coffee table was free so we sat there to wait for our food. Tara offered me her ten bucks, which I declined. While we ate, I asked how her non-shopping went. She said there were good stores here.

"Did you see anything?"

"I saw stuff I might get sometime."

"Did you see things you need?"

"This juice is so good," she said. "But why did you take so long getting the coffee and what are you waiting to tell me tomorrow?" I might as well. This was as good a time as any.

"Remember Greg from the salt flats?" I told her everything. It was her life too and she needed to know. I told her about the tracker and what I did with it, thinking she'd get a kick out of the story. Instead, she had a far away look and shook her head, asking why I hadn't put the tracker on their bumper?

We finished our lunch. Walking back, I asked her, "Are there things you need, clothes, personal stuff, something to read?"

"I don't need anything,"

"Tara, things are uncertain and I don't care about spending a few bucks."

"I don't want to feel obligated to you," she said.

"There's no obligation. If you need something, tell me. I'm not talking about a shopping spree. Maybe a hundred or so."

"I can't. This is already nuts. I just met you. You're too generous. And I don't trust you!"

"You don't trust me Tara? If you don't, I need to go, because getting through this depends on trusting each other."

"I'm messed up," she said. "I don't know what to do." I went into my front pocket for money and peeled off three fifties.

"See you back at the room."

"No," she said, "Please wait outside for me. I'll feel more comfortable."

The message light was blinking. I pushed the button to hear the message. Tara came over and stood next to me, both of us wondering who might have our room number? "Mr. Westbend, this is LaMere at the front desk. We have a cancellation but you'll have to change rooms to a single queen. Would it be acceptable for you and your daughter to sleep in the same bed? If not there might be a cot available. Let me know soon because we're turning people away." I looked at Tara and we cracked up. I don't know if we laughed for the same reason but I choose the world where fearing a message from Swamis, I get asked if it's okay to sleep in the same bed as Tara?

"Do you know the movie *Lolita*?" she asked

"You mean James Mason, Sue Lyon, Shelley Winters, and a whole bunch of Peter Sellers?" She flopped onto her bed on her stomach and elbows, with enthusiastic eyes.

"Yes, I love that movie!"

"What do you love about it?"

"I just love any plot where an old pedophile messes with a young girl." She said this with a straight face until she saw my distress. Then she cracked up. It took me back to riding in South America with Cisco. We laughed more in three weeks than I had in a year. My sides hurt for days but my insides were cleansed.

"What do you love about it Tara?"

"No, what do *you* love about it?" she asked.

"Three of the main characters are mentally ill—decadent," I said

"You saying *Lolita* is mentally ill?"

"I wasn't thinking of the girl."

"Why does half of you sound like the *sermon on the fucking mount*?" she asked. "Do you want to know why I love the movie?" "Please," I said.

"I love the movie because it's black and white, because the characters are amazing, and because it's so honest about sick minds and it's better than you'd expect from Hollywood. Our kiss this morning made me think of it!"

"C'mon Tara, you're an adult—you're not Lolita!"

"Really?" she gave back, fluttering her eyes. "You don't think I'm as sexy as Lo? Let me do the math," she mused. "She's like fifteen. Let's say he's forty-five. That makes him thirty years her senior. How old did you say you are?" She was playing—playing with a flirtatiousness that made me want to forget everything and join in, disregarding those last pages of *Lolita* when Humbert recognizes the real loss, not Lolita being gone from his side but Lolita gone from a *concord* of young voices—from which he had taken her.

Not wanting to hear any more about *Lolita*, I went to the table where my MacBook was still open to the poem about Vegas. At the bottom, she'd typed, *I take it back cowboy—you're the real deal!*

Changing the subject, she asked, "Do you think Swamis is as dangerous as I do, or am I letting this get overblown?" My first inclination was to play down what I really thought, but I didn't.

"Yeah, I think he's dangerous, just like our government using euphemisms like *enhanced interrogation* to describe water-boarding is dangerous. We call other countries, like Russia, police states, which they are, but last year I rode a motorcycle across Russia, ten time zones to our three. How many times did the cops stop me? None! In a country that's barely a democracy I had three incidents with police: one cop telling me I was on the wrong road, then a couple of cops who led me to the highway when I was lost, and another cop on the outskirts of Moscow gesturing in Russian that I was a fool to wait in endless traffic. Motorcycles ride down the center stripe between their lane and oncoming traffic.

"Back home in Ashland, late at night, when I walk my dog downtown, I sometimes see six cop cars in a town of 25,000. As

many patrol cars as I saw cruising the whole of Russia. And when you see cops in Russia, they're on foot or in these little green and white, Opel looking, four cylinder things. Inside our police cars, it's like *Star Wars*. I see our *copification* as mile markers on a road to tyranny. Where guys like Swamis are the point-men."

"So what do we do cowboy?"

"I'm not sure but first we get as unattached to outcome as we can so we're not intimidated by assholes. And we remember to have some fun."

"Are you nuts? There's a psycho after us and you want to have some fun?"

"Yeah, as much fun as possible, because this prick isn't going to change the way I live."

"He could kill us. That doesn't scare you? What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Tara, being free has to do with accepting and not complaining about where you find yourself, then doing the best you can with it. Swamis has power but you and I are better people."

"You're so stupid with all your pronouncements. Better and worse aren't absolute. Swamis coming after us is absolute!"

I stopped her. "What we're talking about here are three kinds of people. The first are all about themselves. That's Swamis. Then the ones who care only about others, which is more often than not a religious affliction. But the best people care about themselves and others. That's us, and that makes us better people. His power, his skewed reality doesn't change it."

"Have you ever killed anyone?" she asked.

"Not yet, but I could. Without a thought!"

"Why do you say, *without a thought*?"

"The great Yankee shortstop, Phil Rizuto. He used to say there's no time for thinking when you hear the crack of the bat."

"That's what pisses me off! That fucking attitude where you think you know everything. Who I am. What you'll do!"

"Sorry," I said, "I like to simplify things."

"Like that kiss? Is that going to simplify things?"

I wasn't ready for this talk so I avoided it.

"I'm not sure but think on this. Lolita was written three blocks from where I live."

Haggard was starting in two hours and we had to change rooms. At some point I needed to call my wife. I'd talked with her once in three days and she'd be wondering. Sometimes when I travel I only call every couple or few days. Now it felt like weeks.

"Are you going to tell her you kissed me and we're sleeping in the same bed?"

"No, I'm not."

"Would it be okay with her?"

"It's never okay. She tells me that if something happens on a trip and I don't bring it home, she doesn't want to hear about it."

"Do you believe that?"

"No, I think she'd like to mean it, maybe we all would, but the same urge that pulls us together, fights to defend what's ours. If I had an affair and it came out, I could remind her what she said, but it wouldn't help much."

"You willing to take that chance?"

"Tara, I love my wife and family but there's some things I can't do without."

"Is it acceptable with you for her to have a lover?"

"Maybe. No."

"Then you're a hypocrite!"

"Maybe not. She doesn't seem have the interest in sex or adventure that I do."

"What are you going to tell her?"

"I'm not sure but I'm going to remember what Lenny Bruce said, 'They don't want to know'."

"Before finding our seats in the arena, I asked, "Beer or wine?"

"What about you?"

"I'm thinking beer for country music. I'm not a big drinker but I'll have a beer for Haggard."

"Are you a drinker at home?"

“Not really, a beer or a glass of wine now and then. When my youngest and his friends asked what I thought about drinking, I told them, 'one with dinner, two if it involves love, and never a third'. He asked me if I'd lived by that and I told him there were mornings I wished I had.”

I ordered three Budweiser's.

"Who gets the second beer?"

“Depends who loves Haggard more?”

"That would be me," she said.

"Well, maybe we can share it, since I have our situation figured out."

"Pray tell," she said.

“If he sings 'The Fugitive', we'll survive. If he sings about wanting to die along the highway, rotting away like some old high line pole. That means the gods are with us."

"What if he does neither?"

"Then we're on our own."

Haggard was great. He's the kind of a performer who's best seen in a sit-down show. Willie's like that too. When you see them in some shit-kicking barn, they play all the “White Lightning”, “Rainbow Stew” crap, with drunk cowboys in huge hats making it so women behind them can't see. When they're asked to remove their hats, they look like somebody shot their horse. Later, after they're good and shit-faced, they spill beer on their neighbors.

Haggard's one of our great poets and he needs a place intimate enough to play the slow ones. Like tonight, no band—just him and his Telecaster. He took his good time, talking between songs. For his last song he sang “Ramblin Fever”, the one about dying along the highway. Tara heard it and squeezed my hand. When he walked off stage I chanted for more with the best of them. I wasn't sure he'd come back but he did. Since I hadn't broken Willie's cardinal rule for hours, I called out, in my clearest, loud voice, that we driven a thousand miles to hear “The Fugitive.” He glanced in my direction. "I don't do requests," he said, then he sang it. We stayed

in our seats until almost everyone was gone. I picked up our beer bottles, all three were empty.

"That was so good," said Tara. "Thanks for taking us. I'm so hungry. What about you?"

"Yeah, me too. We've two choices: we can eat at the casino or go to the IHOP. What are you hungry for?"

"Breakfast. What about you?"

"Yeah, breakfast sounds good."

There was something in that casino I wanted her to see. A few people from the concert were waiting for tables when I put my name on the list, a fifteen minute wait. Fifteen minutes was just enough time. They'd moved it from the casino we were staying, over here next to the IHOP. I took her by the arm. "C'mon there's something you gotta see, something incredible, something that belongs in the Smithsonian. And there it was, Bonnie and Clyde's actual car. Not just their car, but the bigger police Lincoln that caught up with them on the day they died."

She walked around the cars, then went to the pictures and video, which I'd seen. I stayed near the cars counting bullet holes in Clyde's Ford and checking out the dimpled, dents in the Lincoln's door where rounds had bounced off the lead plating under the body. Clyde's car was riddled with bullet holes, maybe fifty in all. Clyde always had better weapons than the cops—more firepower. She came over to where I was checking out the dents on the Lincoln.

"This is unbelievable! These are the real cars!"

"Yeah, the real cars. Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker's legacy, as a roadside attraction, at a second-rate casino, along the California-Nevada border."

"What kind of car is that?" she asked, pointing to Clyde's sedan.

"It's a 1934 FORDOR Deluxe Sedan. The Lincoln was also made by the Ford Motor Company but we better get back."

She touched me on the shoulder: "Is it just me or is it strange to be checking out Bonnie and Clyde's death vehicle, and it's a Ford?"

I just read they were folk heroes to the poor, who didn't want them to get caught, never mind killed."

"You thinking that sounds like us, Tara?"

"Fuck yes it sounds like us, except we don't have the support of the people."

"You're wrong there girl, we have the support of every good person in this country. They just don't know about us. Doesn't mean we don't have their good graces because goodwill travels on the ether, where it protects those who need help."

"It didn't help Bonnie and Clyde," she said.

"Yeah, but we have the gods on our side." She rolled her eyes, looking at me with scorn.

"With those kind of beliefs, you're going to protect us?"

"It's either me or the authorities? Either way, it's no coincidence they drove a Ford. Everybody drove a Ford!"

IHOP, more American culture! We ordered breakfast. I asked if she wanted orange juice? She declined. Something sweet didn't sound good after the beer. Walking back to our hotel, with the wind blowing cold, I put my arm around her. Going through the lobby I put a dollar in a slot machine and lost it. Once in our room, I turned the TV on and surfed while she was in the bathroom. When she came out, I went in. When I came out, she was in bed with the TV off. I did the forty-four pushups I owed for the day and turned off the light. She was over towards her edge of the bed.

"Goodnight Alex."

"Just goodnight?"

"Just goodnight." After a few minutes I could hear the even breathing of her sleep—cadencing my suffering.

6

Flat-earthers have to extend their horizons, just to see there is one.

The next morning, in a bad mood, I sat at the writing table with a Primm pad and a Primm pen. I kept at it for the best part of an hour until Tara sat up with sleepy eyes and hair.

“Good morning,” she said. I said nothing.

“Are you upset with me?” I grunted a no.

“Bet you got a pretty poem over there,” she said with a sardonic smile. I picked up my several sheets, tore them into small pieces, scooped them up, walked into the bathroom and flushed them.

“I’m betting there was something in those pages for me,” she said. She kept on: “Let me ask you something Do I need to be wary with what I say to you the next morning when all you get from me is *goodnight* the night before? I mean, when you don’t get what you want, might you take it out on me?”

“How can you even ask that? It’s a long way from indignant to where you’re going with this!”

“Is it? With some men I’ve known and others I hear about, it’s one small step.” I knew she was right.

“Tara, I may be moody but it stays confined to attitude.”

“So, what’s your problem this morning? You couldn’t get your way last night. Now you’re all huffy?”

“Whatta you mean huffy?” I demanded.

“You’re the writer—huffy, haughty, irritated, touchy.”

I gave back: “Oh yeah, I forgot. You’re an English major.”

“What’s your real problem?” she demanded. “You want paid for services rendered as a bodyguard?”

“That might be nice?”

“What do they call that,” she pondered out loud, “in cultures where women are objects, even more than your Wendover culture.

I remember, *survival sex*? And since I'm relying on you for my survival, the least I could do..."

This wasn't helping. Her cynicism was making it worse.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I should be asking about your feelings instead of going off on you. How are you feeling about your wife and family today? Thought about her today? If we'd had sex last night—then what? Is it a one time thing? What about tonight? Will one night take care of it? Am I the girl who fucks you and doesn't care about your wife and your family? Alex, this is bullshit. I did you a service last night by saying no. We're in the same bed. We like each other. One of us has to be an adult!"

I cut her off: "You know what's worse than bullshit, Tara? Your sitting there sanctifying your genetic strategy, like a horse with blinders, seeing only what's in front of it. As long as it sanctifies the family—right on! That should keep husbands faithful! Keep them bringing home the bacon. We can't all do that Tara. We don't even want to! Life's more complicated than that."

"For men like you who don't care about their families!"

"Of course!" I said. "More than thirty years I've been there for my family. My son's never seen me drunk. I've never hit him. I've accepted a lack of adventure in my wife. Does that describe a guy who doesn't care about his family?"

She didn't let up. "Because you're not a violent alcoholic, that makes you caring?"

"Not fair Tara. Because of the the time I grew up in, and the family I came from, I've had to face myself straight on to become the man I am. Instead of books about sex, my dad thought it better to tell me how he pulled a woman he knew under an outdoor stairway and went at it over her protests. I was maybe twelve years old with my hands over my ears. I didn't want to hear how her head banged against the stairs. How's that for sex education?"

"Sounds like you picked up some of that wisdom," she said, with a tiny chuckle.

"That right Tara? Did I push it last night? Did your head get banged against the wall? My father shared with me two parables about love. That story and how I was to use rubbers with dirty

women.” Telling this last part, I fought my way into my pants and without waiting for anything she might say, I was out the door.

When I came back, she was in the shower. She came out, I went in. When I came out, she was standing by her bag—ready.

"Very efficient," I said.

"Let's go," she said. "I want out of here."

"Go easy Tara. Let's walk and talk. We're in no hurry." She didn't say anything as she worked up a look of resignation on her face and looked at the door.

Going through the casino, she was the first to say something:

“Alex, you’re not who I thought you were. I think we should go our own ways.”

The fury I’d felt in the room returned instantly, but I kept it in check with short shallow breaths. When we’d driven into Primm, I’d been so upset I could have walked through the battle of Antietam and missed it. Now, I was upset for a different reason. She could go her own way but it wasn’t okay that she not see me for who I am—a man like other men—just more honest!

She kept on, “Maybe it’s the age thing. Younger men aren’t like you. They don’t talk about this kind of stuff. You think you’re normal but you’re not. The way you see life isn’t healthy!”

“You know what Tara? You don’t care whether I see things for what they are or not because all you want is to put the problem on me. No worries babe! As long as you're alive, your mother's not dead. She's still shaming with the best of them!”

I was shaking. We’d walked three times around the outlets and were into the fourth. I veered over to the Korean stand and ordered a couple of apple-carrot juices.

"I don't want one," said Tara.

"No problem. I'll drink both. Maybe pour one over your head."

“That wouldn’t be violent?”

“A figure of speech,” I said.

While the Korean woman's husband juiced, I flopped onto the couch beside a fat woman who used the energy of my bounce to rise and head into the mall. I was numb inside. Dealing with

Swamis was preferable to this. All I wanted was to get away from this bitch. Gimmie a ride back to Vegas and drop me off anywhere close to a bus station. I looked back to the stand where Tara had the tiniest smile. I jumped up and went over.

"What the fuck? Are you having fun with how bad I feel?"

"No, I'm (she burst out laughing) thinking how your wonderful life force bounced that fat woman right out of her seat."

Much against my will I started laughing too. She tried to return to mad but a small grin continued to betray her. We walked back to the room, got our bags, and headed for the parking lot. I was still jawing about men and women when I saw a Nevada State Patrol pulled up behind the Ford, one officer on the radio and the other walking around the car, looking in the windows. Tara was holding back and looking down so I took her arm and walked up to his window where we took him by surprise. He startled, at which Tara smiled. He gave me a bad look as he muscled his way out of his car.

"This your car?"

"No, it's my car," Tara replied, with something of an attitude. He gave her the *be careful smart ass—I'm asking the questions here* look, and asked for ID's. To which Tara queried, "Do you have probable cause to ask us for identification. We're not driving, and I own this car, which is licensed, insured, and legal."

"Do you have proof of registration and insurance?" he asked, in an authoritative tone.

"I don't need to show it to you. The car's parked on private property. We're not in it. It's not moving. And you didn't answer my question? Do you have probable cause to bother us?" The second cop had walked up behind us.

"Are we bothering you miss?" he asked, in a demeaning tone.

"If you don't have probable cause for questioning us, yeah, you're bothering me!" I didn't like his standing so close behind us so I took a step to the side and turned enough where I could see both of them.

"Did I tell you, you could move?" said the first cop.

"It's not polite to have your back to someone talking to you," I replied.

"Are you carrying a firearm, sir?" he asked.

"I'm thinking you already know I have a carry permit for the state of Nevada."

"What I need, sir, is for you to take off your waist pack, without opening it and place it on top of the car until we finish here."

Now I know in most states, if you have a carry permit, you don't have to answer the question whether or not you're carrying a firearm. I also know at a traffic stop, when the officer runs your license, if you have a carry permit, it comes up instantly. As a courtesy to the officer and an expression of goodwill for his or her safety, you can tell them you're carrying and sometimes they'll ask that the weapon be placed on the roof of your car until they finish with the stop. But it's not something you're required to do. I did have a handgun with me, a five-shot 357, stainless steel Ruger revolver, unloaded, in one of my BMW bags. In my waist-pack, I had a six-inch, USMC Kabar fighting knife, for which I might also need a carry permit.

"Two things," I said. "In Nevada, with a permit, I don't need to give up my weapon." I was counting on him not knowing the law. "And my friend asked a fair question. Do you have probable cause for detaining us?"

"I don't need cause to question you," he said, aggressively.

"I'm on speaker phone with a reporter from the Las Vegas Sun," I replied. "So I best turn off my phone before you read about yourself in the paper."

"It's illegal to record a police stop in the state of Nevada," he said.

"This isn't a police stop, because you don't have probable cause to detain us, and you just told a reporter you don't need probable cause to question us. By the way, it's not illegal to record police stops in any state. What's really going on here has to do with an asshole from Homeland Security harassing this young woman, wasting taxpayer money to track her. Had we done anything illegal, we'd be cuffed in the back of your car right now."

"We've been ordered to locate and report this vehicle," he said.

"That has nothing to do with us," I said. With that, I walked to the Ford, opened the trunk and loaded the bags. Then we headed across the parking lot towards McDonald's. I sat at a stone table out front while Tara went in for coffee. I kept watch on the interstate west to see if the patrol car went that way, which it didn't. Tara came back with the coffees, lids already on.

"I want cream, girl."

"I got you covered," she said.

"Let's go," I said. "We have a great day ahead of us."

"What are you talking about, *great day*?" she said, giving me a peevish look, followed by a slightly diabolical laugh. Her's was cathartic. Mine was because of something funny.

"Tara, first I gotta say how brave and quick you were back there. OJ's lawyers couldn't have handled those cops any better than you. But that's not what's funny. It's the LaSalle Coupe story. We're living it! Our talk with the cops is right out of the book. Worse than that, I'm sitting here watching to see if they went west or east. But they can't go west. That's California and they're Nevada Cops. We're on the border, changing states, same as the story."

I drove across the parking lot to the gas station even though we still had half a tank. I knew there weren't stations where we were headed. While Tara filled the tank, I dug the Ruger out of my gear, placing it on rear window, package tray so that it was clearly visible. The bullets I locked in the trunk. You want neither a concealed nor a loaded weapon in California. Even with what I did, it might still be illegal, but I was making an effort. We headed out, waiting for the left turn light towards 15. I looked at Tara.

"Betcha that last ten, we head for Vegas and they stop us but if we head for LA they just radio.

"I need my ten. I'm not sure how we're getting along."

I made the left and there they were, off the road, under the overpass, ready for a quick turn towards Vegas. We drove past, signaled left, and headed for California. It was about fifty miles to Baker and fifty miles was enough for the CHP coming the other

way to intercept us so I took a chance and put the pedal to the metal. I asked Tara to keep her young eyes fixed on the horizon for a black and white CHP as I took the Ford up over 120. I was anxious. If they got us for this kind of speed, it's jail time. But I needed to elude them because having Swamis know our whereabouts would be far worse than a speeding rap. My tactic panned out. After a few minutes we came to the exit for Searchlight and Bullhead City where I fishtailed across the overpass south, into a parking lot behind a small store. I went in while Tara stayed where she could watch for cops and not be seen. Inside, I asked the guy behind the counter if he'd been over the forest service road heading north, and did it go to Death Valley? He hadn't and he didn't know where it went. The only time he'd been to Death Valley was west to Baker, then north. Was there anyone else I could ask? He pointed to the manager, an older woman whose face and neck were sun damaged—like cracked sugar cane. She'd never been over the road either but she thought it might go through. I bought a dark chocolate Hershey bar and a California map. Outside, Tara told me the CHP had passed by about two minutes earlier, heading for Primm.,

"Were they going fast?"

"Not as fast as you."

We got in the car and headed up the service road. It was concrete, poured in sections, probably in the 50's, still drivable but cracked into large slabs with weeds growing through the cracks. With California's debt, a resurfacing wouldn't be soon. Tara asked what she could do and I suggested she divide the Hershey bar, which she did, shaking her head like I was an idiot.

I was driving between fifty and sixty, weaving back and forth across the road to avoid potholes and large cracks. The more I thought about it, I slowed to forty.

"Why are you slowing?" she asked

"Because, if they decide we went this way and we're a national emergency, they'll have us way before we get to wherever this road goes. But if they think we can't have made this offramp, or if they don't know about this road, they'll go south. And there's more than

a few cutoffs along that road. Besides, the gods are with us. All we need is a little luck." I asked her to open the map and find this road.

"Okay, trace it to Death Valley and see if it goes through?"

"It does but it's got a section of dotted lines."

"Find the legend—see if it's gravel or dirt?"

"We're not taking this car on dirt roads!" she exclaimed. We both laughed. Sometimes life is too absurd!

I love these old concrete roads, cracked and broken from years of use and weather. These are Steinbeck roads—national treasures. There was a time, maybe in the 30's, when most highway construction was concrete then it changed to asphalt. My life has spanned two-thirds of the history of cars and I go out of my way to ride an old concrete, two-laner like this. Makes for great motorcycle riding and not too bad in the Ford if I stayed below fifty.

"You think the cops will come?" asked Tara.

"I'm not thinking about it. I'm only concerned with things I can control, and that doesn't include the CHP." I let off the gas, coming to a slow stop in the roadway and turned off the ignition.

"Why are we stopping?"

"Because they'll either find us or not and I want to talk to you—see if we can't clear some things."

"Okay."

"One time my wife and I went to dinner at the home of a couple with a kid who is now in his thirties, a good guy. But that night he was four years old and a real terror! After an hour or so, I told them I would never let a child of mine act like that. Years later, when my son was four, I sought them out and apologized for thinking I knew what I was talking about."

"Meaning, I've never been married, had kids, or lived a bunch of years, so I don't know what I'm talking about?"

"If you can accept I'm not dissing you, yes, but if you can't, let me try to talk about it another way."

“No,” she said. “I can agree I don’t know the politics of marriage from my own experience, as long as I’m not being pressured to do something I don’t want to do!”

“Let me say something about me being more honest than most men. People tend to take me into their confidence. They tell me things they don’t tell others. One of the things men tell me is what they do outside of marriage. Some, I wouldn’t suspect, have an addiction to porn. Some frequent massage parlors for happy endings. Others visit prostitutes.”

“Do you watch porn?” she asked.

“I have to be careful because I’m a type A personality. I could become an addict to whatever’s in front of me so, if I simply stay away from sugar, fat, porn, women, drugs to speed things up, and maybe another dozen things—I’m fine!”

“What about prostitutes and porn?” she asked.

“Prostitutes and massage parlors aren’t a problem for me but porn’s a cheap thrill so I have to pull back from it. Same with drinking and some drugs.”

“I’m a woman. I’m on the list of potential addictions,” she said with a smirk. I exhaled heavily. “Sorry,” she said. “You present yourself as an authority about so many things, I like knocking you about.”

“Keep in mind our situation,” I said. “We sleep in the same bed. You’re a beautiful woman. We need each other and we relate well.”

“Relate well? It’s almost a constant feud with us.”

“Tara, we argue, but you’re interested and interesting. You have more curiosity than any woman I know! Like now, we’re stopped in the middle of nowhere and you’re not pressing for us to go.”

“No Alex, I like talking to you but I won’t have sex with you.” “I’m good with that but how about making love?” She smiled straight into the road. I started the car and headed in the direction of Death Valley.

“One more little story Tara and I’ll stop.”

“Go ahead,” she said. “But it won’t change my mind.”

“One time I was watching a talk show. One of those afternoon ones where the audience is mostly women. The guest was a beautiful Mexican woman, who hired herself out to prospective brides, testing whether their husbands-to-be were of the faithful persuasion. She’d frequent their haunts with information provided by the women.”

“She was prepared to sleep with them?”

“No, like a sting operation, she’d take it to where she was sure, then retreat.”

For a minute or so I drove this broken sliver of concrete straight into the high desert, approaching the first bends at the base of the mountains.

“You got more to tell?” she asked.

“Yeah, she’d worked for more than 100 women and in her view, all of the men, or nearly all of them, would have had sex with her.”

“All of them?” asked Tara, quizzically.

“All except those who didn’t have opportunity. You know, it probably wasn’t all but taking into account this might be the last opportunity for them and they weren’t yet married, they could provide themselves one last rationalization!”

“Support for your genetic strategy,” said Tara. “But it changes nothing for me.”

“Tara, this road reminds me of the past. It brings memories. Things were different in the 50’s. Cars were big and heavy. Gas was cheap—twenty-five or thirty cents.”

“But didn't you make a lot less?”

“Yeah, working in the markets, I made a couple of bucks an hour, which bought six gallons of gas. Now I'd have to make twenty-five dollars an hour to do the same. Cars cost less. My first car was a 1950 Ford convertible, ten years old. Guess what it cost?”

“No idea—500 bucks?”

“Sixty bucks, but there were downsides back then. When you came out of a store, you’d maybe have a flat tire.”

“Often?”

“More often than you’d think and some things didn't last like they do now. Parts wore out, like the brushes in generators and

starters. And you needed a ring and valve job every fifty or sixty-thousand miles."

"What are rings?"

"Just like it says, steel bands, around the piston, against the cylinder wall, to make compression. The power to drive the car. They'd wear out but it didn't cost much to re-do them. The adds would go, 'Need rings and valves? Lou's Garage—\$69.99, most 6's —\$89.99, most 8's.'. A week of work would pay to rebuild the top end of an engine. When it was time to paint a car, it was, 'I'm Earl Scheib, and I'll paint any car, any color, for \$29.95.'. Tires were the most fun though. We didn't have money for new tires so most everybody bought re-caps, made from tires with worn tread. They'd grind off the rest of the tread then replace it with new tread and for a few bucks you'd have a newish tire. But problems happened when they re-capped the same tire, one too many times. More than once I following someone with a huge bulge on the inside of a back tire. You had to pick the ones with young sidewalls."

"Sounds really dangerous."

"It was and in the early 50's with no seat belts, no insurance, and a car that weighed a ton, it was a fucking blast! The cars were easy to work on and we were our own mechanics. And this beast is the best of the best!"

"Those people back there at the store reminded me of riding through Central and South America. I'd be on what I thought was the Pan American Highway, but the roads are badly marked. I'd stop to ask if I was going the right way, with my AAA map out, asking about a town maybe twenty miles down the road. Often they wouldn't know. I thought it was my Spanish but it turned out they'd never been there and there was only the one road! For so many people, life is so small! What happened at the borders between countries was even more telling. Some guy would ask, 'You going over there?' I'd say I was and he'd shake his head in disbelief. 'You gonna get killed over there, man.' 'You been over there?' I'd ask. 'No man!' The inevitable reply."

"Isn't this supposed to be about the people at the store back there?" she asked.

"Yeah, the woman who owns the store, and the guy who's worked there for years, didn't know if this road went through to Death Valley. There's only one road and it begins at their store!" Tara construed a different meaning from the story:

"They have a little life and a little store. They're not involved in high speed evasion of the police and nobody wants to hurt them."

I asked, "Would you rather I turn back and drop you there? You could work there, live there, and die there. Swamis would never find you!"

"Take Willie's advice and drive!" she said.

We hadn't seen one car when road turned to gravel then to dirt. We were gaining elevation and it became obvious we had to cross a mountain range before Death Valley. The dirt was freshly graded and soon we passed the grader coming our way. The driver stuck his whole upper body out of the window. In recognition of the car? We crested and began a descent. We weren't all that high but the valley before us was so low it was as if we were crossing the Continental Divide. Soon we passed Tecopa, then Shoshone, where we took a left on 178 and entered the national park.

Everything slows in Death Valley. The speed limits are low. The road undulates, which was fun in the Ford, each dip a cheap thrill. The vistas are enormous, high mountains on two sides, containing the basin as the valley continues its descent. We passed the West Road, the Mormon road for the early trek from Salt Lake to Los Angeles.

"Leave it to the Mormons," said Tara. "It's not enough to pull a wooden cart from Missouri to Utah. For their next trick they pick a southern route through Death Valley."

We came to Badwater, two hundred and eighty-two feet below sea level, the lowest place in North America. We walked out to what looked to be the lowest spot. On the way back I told Tara how four years ago my youngest son, who was then twelve, raced me back to the car and beat me. Tara took off towards the car. I went

after her, for a time maintaining the distance between us but slowly she increased it. She was waiting by the car.

"You may be strong," she said, "but fast—not so much."

We drove on to Death Valley Center where I took a left and pointed out in the distance, the amazing hotel, surrounded by desert, complete with date palms and plants, conjuring up the Gardens of Babylon. Its only water source being huge collection tanks in the hills, piped down by gravity to the hotel, which is open from late fall to early spring, the rest of the year being too hot for tourists. And not enough water. Off to our right were date groves, more reasonably priced rooms, a not-so-reasonably-priced golf course, and a restaurant and bar with outside seating.

"Let's go to the cheaper place," she said.

"I was thinking we'd camp but I only have one air mattress and sleeping bag." She undid her safety belt, reached over the back seat and came up with both items.

"Traveling across the country with small resources," she said, "these are necessities."

I drove past one campground where generators are allowed, past a second where they are not, and up into the third where I usually camp, but no one was there. We looked at each other knowing we wanted the safety in numbers area. As if a few campers could protect us from Swamis. I found a sheltered campsite behind a small rise, which would hide us from the wind that comes down the valley. I cleared a small area of stones and set up the tent. It's called a two-person but I see it as one with room for motorcycle gear. When I was done, Tara looked at me and said, "Cozy," with an impenetrable smile. We walked to the pay station where I bought a pass for seven dollars and fifty cents.

"Why's it so cheap?" she asked.

"Because, when you get to be sixty-five, you qualify for the Golden Age Passport, which gives you free entrance to national parks and half-price camping for life. Life or whatever comes first?"

Back at the Ford, I took the Ruger from the package tray, put the bullets in a sandwich bag and locked them in the glove box. The waist-pack and revolver I put in the trunk.

"What's that about?" asked Tara.

"That's about California. They don't recognize any other state's carry permit. Firearms and bullets have to be locked up separately. That the law for a vehicle," I said, "but I wonder if a tent qualifies as your home?"

"I like all those restrictions on guns," she said.

"Tell me about it when Swamis is chasing you through a drain-pipe, in a foot of water—at night!" The pained expression on her face made me wish I hadn't said it .

"I don't carry a gun in California," I said, digging into my waist pack and bringing out my knife. "Because I have a carry permit, the police assume I'm carrying. When I travel on my bike, this waist pack stays with me, twenty-four-seven. In forty countries I've only had one knife confiscated. They usually don't ask what's in the pack. Are you getting hungry?"

"Starting to, let me get the food and..."

"Not tonight lady. Tonight we hike to the grand hotel and eat off white linen." She smiled and looked askance, I suppose at the contrast between the tent and white linen. With another half hour of daylight, we donned our best finery and headed out through the upper campground into the chalk-clay hills, then a slow ascent to the top. Not much vegetation, except below, where a small finger of water had carved its way down to the valley. Finding a good spot to cross the narrow gorge, we hiked the long uphill to a stone structure with a large cross at the top of the ridge. When we reached it, the sun had begun it's slide. The view was enormous, with the whole of Death Valley laid out below. We stood without talking until there was just enough light to get down to the hotel.

The hotel is splendid, build entirely on a hill, with narrow walkways and passages, at least one of them underground. We walked past rooms and looked in with a tinge of envy. One elderly couple, sitting out, saw us looking and asked if we were staying there? I

told them we were camping but had come over for dinner. "Good choice!" said the man. "We stay here for three nights and all I can think about is how much money I'm spending."

In the bar and I put our names on the dinner list—thirty minutes. The bar was spacious and comfortable. We sat on a couch with a low table. Soon the barmaid came by.

"What'll it be folks?"

"Two beers," I said. "In the bottles please. What do you have?" We settled on DOS XX.

As the waitress turned to go, Tara said, "My father has a drinking problem, along with diabetes. Before we left home the doctor admonished him to have only one beer, a second could kill him. So please, no matter what, he's to have no second beer." I think she was trying to tell me something. The barmaid gave me a look.

Before the beers arrived, a young waiter with a blond ponytail glanced at us as he passed by, then swung a quick turnabout and came back.

"My hero," he said. "What the hell are you doing back here?"

"Ah!" I said. "You remember, you were a little drunk."

"I remember you. You rode a motorcycle across Russia and South America. You're my hero!"

"You working the dining room tonight?"

"I am. Are you staying here?"

"I wish we were," said Tara. "We're sleeping in a small tent in one of the campgrounds. But we're here to eat. I'm Tara."

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Jason."

"Maybe, you'll be our waiter?" I asked.

"I'm going to make sure of that!"

When he left, I said, "I wish we were? What happened to the girl who wanted to sleep in the car?"

"She's gone!"

I was in a fairly good mood, but underneath I was still irritated about the morning and things she'd said.

"I'm wondering why you were so mean this morning?" The expression on her face tightened.

"Do you have to dredge it up now? I'm trying to be in the moment and you're stuck in the past."

"Like your relationship with your mother? You avoided those feelings for years. How'd that work for keeping you in the moment? This morning I was down, and you leveled me."

The barmaid came by and I spoke to her.

"Sorry, but I get upset with my girlfriend when she fabricates a story about diabetes because I like a few beers. She's afraid I'll drink too much and when we get back to the room I'll just fall asleep. So when we get a table, could you please bring us two more beers?" Tara looked like she might smile, but didn't.

"You just love to push it, don't you? You ever think maybe I'm right that you're just a deluded old man, with someone young enough to be your granddaughter?" I'm not sure why, but this made me think back to the navy and my first exposure to barracks life. I enjoyed the blacks bantering with each other—comebacks with horrific references about one another and each other's *mmas*. That banter wasn't personal. No one took offense. It was a creative game of one-ups-man-ship that made everybody laugh. This was different. I'd told Tara my grandfather was a pedophile, which made her references to Lolita and my being old enough to be her grandfather, a shade tacky. Her father and I were close to the same age.

"Way below the belt Tara. I'm not old enough to be your grandfather. I've had enough."

The barmaid announced, with a furrowed brow, "Alex, party of two, your table's ready."

The hostess seated us and there we sat without looking at each other. The linen was clean, the flowers were real, and the view from the mostly glass wall was panoramic though there wasn't much to see at night, a sliver of moon and a few lights, twinkling in the wind, far down the valley. Jason approached with two more DOS XX.

"The barmaid was reluctant to let you have these but I assured her I knew you." He left us two menus and the wine list. I passed a menu to Tara.

"I don't want it, I'm not hungry!"

"Tara, lighten up. This is about both of us. I can deal with my end. If you stay clear with me, I can accept it. What I can't accept is someone who's opaque and won't fight fair. It's time you quit looking at me like I'm the one that made you who you are."

Jason came back and we ordered dinner. I was resolved this would be our last night together. I took some comfort in that but I cared about Tara and I wanted to enjoy this meal. I changed the subject to something we could agree on.

"Do you think those cops believed us about Swamis?"

"I do," she said. "But they're cops, and cops are cops for a reason. Even if they accept what we say, they follow orders."

"Was it fun?" I asked.

"Yeah, in a way, it's all been fun. I've been thinking about you saying you wanted to have fun with it. It's either tragic or comic so we might as well have a laugh. All those people at the salt flats taking Swamis so seriously. Why don't they ask him who the fuck he thinks he is—treating people like he does?"

"So you think it was okay I didn't cave in to Swamis?"

"Fuck no!" she said a little too loud, causing the family at the next table to look over at us. "Sorry," she said to them. "Sometimes my dad says the dumbest things." The dad nodded.

"You really want to know if I think what you did was okay?" she asked. "Fuck no!" she whispered. "For you, self-preservation, even if your friends are threatened, is an afterthought at best. Sometimes, I can't tell if you're brave, stupid, or both."

This was good—more like the banter in the barracks. She was smiling now and she was starting to see Swamis and the whole situation as ridiculous, maybe funny? "All told," she said, "I think you're one brave, tough motherfucker." The people at next table looked over again but now we were having a good time and they were smiling. Tara was loosening up, talking through her second beer.

"I need a weapon. I'll only travel in states with a *stand your ground* law, cause he won't expect me to shoot him. And I will. I can get away with it because I'm young and good looking. Heaven forbid you shoot him. Your picture in the paper, with the circumstances of our story, would put you away for life."

When Jason came by I asked if they had champagne. They didn't but they did have some kind of sparkling wine.

"I don't want any," she said, and we both laughed.

"She doesn't want any, Jason, but I'll take a bottle and two glasses. And do you have any chocolate decadence that comes with two spoons?"

"Do we ever!" When he came back with our order Tara said she wasn't a drinker but she wanted to drink that wine and eat that cake. Which got us laughing again. We were so bound up, it didn't take much.

"If we drink that bottle, we'll need a ride back to camp," she said.

I looked to Jason, who said, "Hold that thought," as he bounded out towards the bar. Soon he came back, asking if we wanted to stay at the hotel—for fifty dollars.

"Absolutely!" I said. "Can you work that?"

"Sometimes, depending on who's on the desk, it's a late night fifty dollars for friends. Don't tell nobody and leave a good tip for the cleaner."

"You got it! Thanks so much buddy."

"For my hero? Besides I live on tips."

Halfway through the wine, with just crumbs of cake left, I said to Tara, "You gotta sell the car."

"You're nuts. That's my dad's car and it's not for sale!"

"Then we have to put it somewhere safe until this blows over."

"Just where would that be?"

"I'll think on it, but you need a plan when you leave here."

"When I leave here? Am I leaving here alone?" I didn't respond and changed the subject. We drank the rest the wine and soon we were the last patrons in the restaurant. Jason brought the bill with the key to our room, explaining how to get there. He also told us he

wasn't working tomorrow and he'd like to get together with us and his wife. It sounded good, but I was not at all convinced I would still be here. On somewhat unsteady legs, we headed through the bar. The barmaid was wiping down tables and I changed direction towards her.

"Thanks for your help tonight," I said, handing her a ten.

"Thank you," she said, this time with a smooth brow. We walked on with Tara saying to no one in particular...

"Alex may be an asshole but he always tries to put things right." She put the words to a bit of a song." I saw a young woman behind the front desk and smiled. She smiled back. We walked to the counter.

"Hi, we're friends of Jason's and we need to know what time is check-out?"

"It's noon."

"I wanted to thank you," I said, in the best *I'm not drunk imitation* I could muster, "and I'm wondering if we could have a 2 p.m. check-out," I said, handing her a ten.

"It's all right by me," she said, "but I'll have to tell the maid there'll be something for her in the room. You two have a good night."

There were many rooms on several levels and we got lost but it was fun being outside in the open air, supporting each other along the narrow concrete walks against the rooms and along the switch-backs up or down to the next level. Our room was 317. It took a bit of exploring to find the third level.

"I like this," I said. "We're on the top. We won't have the sound of shoes on our heads in the morning."

"That's good. Why did you want a 2 p.m. check-out?"

"A memory made me do it. The last time I had this much to drink, I was with my friend Lee, at a club in Vegas with his business friends. I wasn't having a good time and the staff kept rolling out carts of hard liquor. Before I knew it, the next morning was a disaster. When Lee left for the airport, it took me the better part of an hour to get from the room down to the lobby."

"Look," she said. "317."

It was a good room with a great view of the valley and the gardens just below us. The walls were all hand plastered. Martha Stewart had personally picked the colors. There were two queen beds with muted, earth-tone spreads, and four, feather pillows on each bed. Tara was first into the bathroom when I remembered we had no toothbrushes, or anything else for that matter, but I was drunk enough to not care. She came out and sat on her bed while I went into the bathroom. On top of the marble double sink was everything a guest might need, including new toothbrushes and toothpaste, even a comb. That's how the rich live, they get drunk, need a room, only to find they've left everything at the other hotel. When I came out Tara had folded her comforter down and was sitting on her bed in panties and a tee shirt. I was folding down my comforter until she said, "Uh, uh cowboy," and patted the sheet beside her. "But no sex." I slipped in beside her and turned out the light. My heart was beating for the end of the world. I worked on my breathing until it deepened.

"Can we kiss some?" I asked.

She demurred. I waited.

"We can, if it's just kissing and you need to agree to go to the other bed if I say so." I agreed. After maybe ten minutes, with things getting intense, she stopped and said I had to go.

"This isn't just about sex," I said. "There's something more going on between us."

Resolved to change beds the next time she told me to go, I kissed the back of her neck while she dug fingers into me. I never moved more slowly in my life, fearful for her words at every second. After what seemed a plant age, with my fingers along her back, under her shirt, I lifted it up over her arms and off, staying away from her breasts, stroking her stomach and arms. Like a MMA fighter, I slipped behind her with her back against my chest, and still I didn't touch her breasts. I kissed her ears and massaged her shoulders, my arms crossed over her chest, the movement of my forearms raising her nipples. Almost imperceptibly, I began

rubbing her nipples between my thumbs and forefingers, holding my breath—expectant, with her breathing intensifying as I took more liberties, cupping and exploring her breasts. She began making small sounds as I lifted her, bending her knees and parting her legs. My hands massaged her calves and squeezed the meaty backs of her thighs, rocking her unhurriedly and gently, up and back, until my hands were under her, lifting her, kneading her bottoms, exploring the insides of her thighs, inches from where they met. With one soft finger, I traced her vagina through wet panties. Her breathing labored as she pushed with her feet on my thighs, undulating against me. “I think I’m giving in,” she said.

7

The gods send us doubt after doubt before trusting us with someone they love.

Morning came late. We walked down to the garden and sat by the rivulet of a stream where it emptied into a pond, canopied by large shade trees. It was paradise and we were alone down there.

"Interesting night?" I said.

"Hmm," she replied.

"What does hmm mean?"

"Not much. It means the whole time I was thinking I was with the wrong guy."

"But, you invited me into your bed!"

"I asked you to go back to your own bed."

"And I was ready to go if you said it twice. This sounds like high school non-accountability."

"Telling you once should have been enough! Last night happened because you kept us drinking. You ordered more wine. I wouldn't have done it."

“Unbelievable! Even if I play fair, when it’s all said and done, you’re a child who can’t make her own decisions—who needs protected by the man she needs protected from!”

“I tried to draw the line at one drink. I asked you to stay with the bargain and leave my bed,” she said, forcefully.

“Yeah, you drew the line at one drink by making me into your diabetic father who’d die from a second drink. You think I’m going for that?”

“Can’t you just get it through your head? Neither sex, nor romance, is happening between us. You need to get it straight!”

“And you need to get straight with men’s history of getting screwed by women’s unaccountability. Women lie, deny reality, forget their sweet invitations—anything to cover their asses!”

“I only want you in my bed because I’m scared,” she said. “I’m no home wrecker and you’re the wrong guy anyway. You’re old enough...”

I cut her off: “You can’t have it both ways Tara. If you don’t want to play, don’t invite me into your game.”

“Don’t you play the card about protecting me,” she said.

“You want me to go against the way the world works? The history of sex is written around men protecting women.”

I gave her the key to the room and a ten for the maid, telling her I needed some time. When she was up the stairs, to where she couldn’t see me, I walked to a low stone wall separating the gardens from the desert, sat, swung my legs over, and headed back towards the campground. Crossing rocky, barren ground, I thought back to a time my friend Stan and I met two women at a concert, one was Swedish and the other, her Iranian friend. The Swede and I got on well but she was married and had to go. When Stan saw someone he knew and went to talk, the Iranian woman asked why I’d been avoiding her all evening? We ended up spending the night together. I remember taking it real slow, lots of foreplay, enjoying her, not rushing anything. In the morning I wanted to do it again but she said people were getting together for blueberry pancakes and she was hungry. Something didn’t feel right and I let her go

without me. When I saw the Swedish woman again, she told me her friend had hated me the whole time we made love. That memory, and whatever made me think about it now, cast this barren ground as a bleak, chalky hilled, biblical desert.

Needing to get my mind on something else, I opened the trunk to get my MacBook when I heard the whirr of an approaching golf cart. Brian, the campsite director, who I'd met months earlier when I'd camped at this spot, pulled up. He got out and came over to the picnic table.

"Hey, I know you," he said.

"Hi Brian. Told you I'd be back. I didn't get to thank you for lending me the hatchet."

"Still there if you need it," he said.

"This time I remembered to bring one."

"Did you stay here last night? I came through late and again early this morning but I didn't see anyone?"

"No, I think we drank a bit much. One of the waiters at the hotel got us the friend's rate."

"The friend's rate?"

"Yeah, fifty bucks"

"That's phenomenal, and since you didn't stay here last night, you don't have to buy a pass for tonight. Hey, remember that bunch of English who were here the last time? I had to kick them out. Cops came out in middle of the night. They damn near got arrested."

Brian left and I began to write. When I finished I saw Tara walking through thick, warm air from down below. She came into camp and asked me what I'd been doing?

"Writing, I needed to get my mind on something different."

"Me too. I went back to the garden. Can I hear what you wrote?" I read to her.

death valley

last night

the wind came up
sweeping chalky hills
rattling bushes
and whipping my tent
like bed sheets on a clothesline
but tonight the valley's still
not a wisp of wind
to unfocus the stars

borax miners
long dead
sleep peacefully
my eyes are heavy
with elmore leonard
and I begin to drift
when I hear them coming
to the steel sinks and faucets
clattering their pots
in drunken english accents
with no thought
for the majestic silence
that contains us
all day they've been cooking
whatever the fucking british eat
ham hocks
jellowed salads
with constant teas
and always the drinking
as if the hallucinogenic divinity
of this place
weren't enough
why don't they go back
to leeds or bath?
give back the sanctity
of this place
just a few bird calls

the occasional coyote

late next morning
they stroll by
he sees my motorbike
and comes over
talking about a bsa
and birmingham
when he was a lad
she notices I have no pots
“do you cook?”
i show what I have
a six-pack of orange juice
not from concentrate
a big bag of raisins and cashews
kipper snacks
rye-crisp and provolone
a jar of mustard
raisin muffins
almond butter and jam
“how can you exist on that?”
I smile at them
“did you hear those loud drunk motherfuckers
clattering their pots in the night?”

"You got it going on, don't you?" she said. "I'm down there, hungover, sitting in the garden, confused, feeling like I did something wrong, while you're up here writing a poem. You get a young woman drunk and while you're kissing her, you let her know what's between you and her has to do with love, but in the morning when she has second thoughts, you take no responsibility—because she invited you! Think about it Alex, you say you don't have a second drink unless it involves love. I tried to block the second drink because my feelings for you don't involve love. I'm not blaming you but you were there and you're an adult. I'm not sure what that was last night but it was lubricated by two beers, pas-

sionate arguing and a full bottle of wine, which goes in your column since we were already fighting about the sex we didn't have the night before. It doesn't enter your mind that you have a wife and son at home, because you're living out your stupid biological strategy that's nothing more than *love the one you're with!* Are you even listening to me, Alex?"

"I am, but I lost focus when you brought up *last night* and *lubrication*."

"You're a real asshole Alex. If you took the time to think about it, you might ask yourself how this is going to play out?"

I interrupted her: "Tara, why make such a big deal about it?"

"Big deal Alex? Where does it go tonight? How about tomorrow night? Listen how this plays out. 'Carla, this is Tara—I didn't mean for this to happen.' It's bullshit Alex! I wouldn't want to be *that woman* in your wife's life, even if you were thirty-five years old and everything I ever wanted. You live in a dream world where everything's tied up with a neat little bow. Let me tell you how this really plays out and don't even think of interrupting me! Forget our age difference. Say I let myself fall in love with you. And after a few weeks you begin noticing things about me that bother you. The initial heat has cooled and you begin to miss your family and your home. Better yet, you decide your love for me is stronger than for your family. Your family of three decades, who respect and depend on you. Why, and how, could I ever trust a man who could do that? More than likely you accept the rationalization, and most men need one or two just to get through the day, that in the bigger picture I'm not who you thought I was and you give me some money to move on."

"Tara, how can you say...."

"I'm not done. I'm thirty-five years old and I want a family of my own, unless you think I'm going to be satisfied with the one I grew up with. There's more, Alex. I don't want to lose you. I'm thinking how good of friends we can be if you stay in your own bed. I don't want you to leave. Being with you, I'm seeing things about the world and who I am in it. So how's that? Can you get real

and see me as your friend, with no strings, or do you have to live your fantasy out and defend it with your macho pride?"

"Tara, this would be easier for me if there wasn't so much that attracts me to you."

"For both of us," she said, "but is that reason enough to lose a friend?"

Why it never goes with women, the way I think it will, should cease to amaze me? Like a boxer, who doesn't know he's out-classed until he gets hit a ripping shot under the liver, I found the fight taken out of me. She wanted me to see our situation in the big picture and stay with her. It wasn't exactly a rejection. She needed me, she was attracted to me. Shouldn't that be enough? Fuck! Could I deal with this? Probably not, but I was hearing her.

I made two calls, both went well. Carla was concerned but not surprised that I'd found myself an adventure. She knew I couldn't keep my mouth shut. She was confident I'd be able to handle it, but I wasn't being upfront about how bad things were. She didn't ask much about Tara and she didn't want to hear much.

When I got back to camp, Tara was in the tent setting it up for sleeping. I suggested we drive down to Furnace Creek for a couple of bundles of firewood and some newspaper. She drove and I kept watch, thinking the only cops we might see would be from the park. We pulled into the parking lot, to a black and white CHP parked beside the visitors center with no one in it. I asked her to park where the car wouldn't be seen.

Parked, she said, "We need to sit here until they leave."

"That wouldn't be any fun," I quipped. She gave me a twisted smile. Walking back, I asked if she was hungry?

"Oh not really, I haven't eaten in fourteen hours!"

"I take that to mean you could eat something?" I said, as two California Highway Patrolmen came walking in our direction. I felt Tara tense up, so I steered towards them.

"Excuse me officers, could you direct us to the golf course?"

"No problem," said the female officer. "Walk past this next row of cabins, turn right, and it's straight ahead."

"Thanks much," I said. "Good duty driving around Death Valley?"

"It would be but we only get to come out here on calls."

"Well, it's a beautiful drive anytime," I said. "Thanks for the directions."

Once we made the turn and headed for the course, Tara asked, "Do you think they're here because of us?"

"Maybe, yeah."

"Then how can you be so cool walking up to them?"

"Cause we haven't done anything wrong."

I knew where the golf course was. I'd been there with my youngest and his friend when they were twelve-year-olds. It has outdoor seating and a TV. We went there because there aren't many public TVs in Death Valley and we wanted to see the NCAA basketball playoffs—four teams playing to reach the final. I remember asking the cost to play a round of golf? Prohibitively expensive. Since the kids wanted to stay all afternoon and watch both games, we nursed hamburgers and soft drinks as long as we could, now and then adding an order of fries. I still don't like to throw money away but I have some and Tara was getting more comfortable with me paying. There wasn't much of a menu so we settled for cheeseburgers and salad. I asked if she wanted a beer?

"Maybe never again," she said. "I have my new rule. One if I'm stupid, two if I'm insane. This morning, sitting in the garden, I asked myself how I could make it thirty-five years without knowing how my parents functioned in my life? I think I accepted that other kids deserved more than me. Now, when I look at other women's lives, I don't want those lives, but why have I settled for so little?"

"For your own reasons," I said, "you avoided what you either couldn't see, or had to ignore."

"How do you mean?" she asked.

“You have a degree in literature and to get it, you had to read books, some of which are about kids who get messed up by their parents. *Death of a Salesman*—you read that?”

“Of course I read it.”

“Remember Willie's son, Biff? He grows up with his dad's unrealistic expectations, exaggerations, and cheating. He's a loser—just like his father. But he sees it in time and says to his dad, 'I'm nothing—you're nothing'. That kills Willie, but it sets Biff free.”

Lunch arrived. From the shaded seating area, I looked along the vista. It was warm out there, where golfers, like desert tribesmen, were pushing through the rippling vapor. The course was green, just green enough to pass. Amazing, that in this low desert, it could be green at all. Golf was on the TV. Tiger Woods was falling apart again. I'm really two ways about Tiger. I want him to win because he's Tiger but I take delight in his failures because he's a bought and sold corporate hack who peddles stupid wristwatches to rich people. Now that we all have phones, except for status, who the fuck needs a watch? He hit another ball into a trap and I thought, *Man, you lost it when you gave that phony press conference! It didn't save you. The sponsors left, and your wife took all that money. You should have told the truth. You like to fuck waitresses!*

After lunch we shopped so we wouldn't have to come back down to eat. We bought two plastic-wrapped bundles of firewood, five or six sticks in each, and a newspaper. The hatchet and a box of stick matches were packed in my gear. It seemed foolish to drive more than necessary but I wanted her to see something. Assuming the cops were no longer in the park, I drove past the hotel and headed up the road towards Death Valley Junction until we came to Zabriskie Point where I pulled in and stopped.

“What is this?” she asked, as we scurried up to the lookout.

“Something worth seeing,” I said, pointing out the trail marker for Golden Canyon. I suggested she start walking in the direction of the late afternoon sun and I'd drive to the mouth of the canyon

below, hike up, and meet her coming down. I took the waist pack with my knife and handed it to her.

"What's this for?"

"So you have some protection until I meet you on the trail."

"How far is it?"

"The whole thing's a couple or three miles. We don't have time to hike down and back and I want you to see it."

"How we're getting along, I'm not sure I want to walk into a desert canyon alone, while you take my car." The way she said it expressed sadness—not distrust.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "I'm not entirely convinced by your *Homily at the Picnic Table* this morning. In the end, the now trumps everything!" With a look of incredulity, she headed down the trail.

I parked at the entrance to Golden Canyon and headed up the path, paying little heed to my stiff and numb feet. The numbness started in the toes about three years ago. I tried bicycle riding instead of hiking but it's better when I walk. I went to this Dr. Muhammed, a neurologist who scared the shit out of me, telling me I was one in a thousand, and the only possible cause was auto-immune disease, or worse. He promptly sent me for twenty-nine blood tests that revealed little or nothing, but the ninety minute visit cost more than two grand. I tried explaining to him that I rode motorcycles, 500 miles a day, for weeks at a time, and much of my life had been spent running, sometimes barefoot on asphalt, or sitting on a hard bicycle seat. All of which might cause nerve damage. He wouldn't hear any of it. "This is my specialty," was his answer for everything! He wanted me to take more rarified cancer tests but I'd had enough. From my experience with Muhammed, I learned that, other than the emergency room, frequenting doctors wastes your time and scares the crap out of you. If they do find something, they have their two default miracle cures, chemo and radiation, which somehow remind me of blood letting with leeches. Since I already know I'll die in the next decade or two, I'm taking my chances!

I have friends in SoCal who've lived nearby for decades and never seen Death Valley. One time I talked Lee into making a two-day, five hundred mile drive, over little used back roads, so he'd have at least one vivid memory of how close he lives to wilderness.

With the sun close to disappearing behind the ridge across the valley, I picked up my pace through the canyon, into layered hills of red and yellow strata, each bend in the trail suggesting a different age. I thought about my son and his friends, intent on their iPhones, living a virtual life, a text life. I let that go.

My feet feel better when I walk. Better circulation. They're never all the way better but neither are they worse. Maybe it's just sixty-seven year old legs?

I was beginning to wonder about Tara? I'd come more than a mile to the junction for Zabriskie Point. Could I have missed her? I headed up the trail just as she was coming down.

"Alex, this is amazing!"

"You really like it?"

"I love it. It changes every minute. I've been alone. There's no one on the trail. I had the whole world to myself." She was right. We were alone, probably too late in the day for tourists to start up or down. There was still light but a fast approaching gloom altered what we saw and would soon change how we felt about it.

Coming out of the canyon there were three cars in the lot, a van with Chinese characters painted on the side, the Ford, and the California Highway Patrol. Tara must be getting used to this because she didn't look down. Both officers, the man and the woman, got out of the car and stood next to the Ford. The female officer said, "I need to see some ID."

"We've heard that before," I said. "In Nevada, but it turned out the instructions were specifically to locate and report the car. If those are your instructions, what's your probable cause for stopping us? I should tell you, I'm on speaker phone with a reporter from the Las Vegas Sun."

"There's no phone service here," she said, matter-of-factly. "I need some ID." I tried to be helpful.

"My friend here is being pursued by a insane dude who's part of Blackwater, Halliburton, and now Homeland Security. If we'd done anything wrong or if he could get away with it, we'd already be under arrest. He can't have us arrested so he does this locating thing with a tracker on the car, which is another violation of our rights." She turned to her partner.

"What do you want to do Herm?" Herm smiled, rather good-naturedly.

"You do know, that anywhere you go, this car will be spotted and stopped, and not all police will be Officer Summers and myself?"

"Yes officer, I do," I said.

"In that case, we're going to report the location of the vehicle when we get back to Baker." Meanwhile, the Chinese had loaded into their van and left. The CHP pulled onto the highway and turned south towards California. We watched them disappear into the last light.

Back at camp, I made a fire while Tara put together some food. After a few minutes the fire took over for itself, its flames and smoke pulled straight up by the quiet night air. Camp chairs we didn't have, so we dragged the picnic table a few feet closer to the fire. There's something in a fire that stops conversation. It draws you in. We sat for long intervals, interrupted only by my adding another log to a melee of sparks, as flames went after the newcomer. I spent long minutes, mesmerized by the colors and patterns, hypnotized by the embers. The first bundle of firewood seemed to go fast but as the coals deepened, time slowed to a crawl. Our silence was wrapped in the silence around us, comforting the uncertainty of our lives. As long as it was still, and it was still for a long time, we were still. Then, small twists of wind pushed the flames in one direction, then another, making us lean to avoid the smoke, which broke the reverie—the interlude from our troubled lives.

"What'd you mean by my *Homily at the Picnic Table*?" she asked. "I thought I was making sense of our situation and you were agreeing with me?"

"I was, and you were making sense, but what I said about the now trumping everything makes more sense. The intellect has it all worked out like you say, *everything tied up with a neat little bow*, but that does injustice to John Lennon: 'Life is what happens to you, while you're busy making other plans'."

Tara's face gave off a glow, softly lit by the remaining embers, when a small but pugnacious wind scattered what was left of the fire into a thousand scintilla.

"This morning," I said, "your words were convincing, but as the day wore on, bringing the reality of sleeping with you tonight in a small tent, they began to sound like the preacher's homily, after the sermon, during the punch and cookies, where he instructs the congregation on practical matters."

She laughed. "My thoughts, my beautiful thoughts—a flotilla of Greek ships, their carved prows facing down adversaries, only to be scattered across the dark Aegean by the hubris of an ancient, insatiable satyr, twisting the well-intentioned, corrupting the well-reasoned, so as to de-flower unsuspecting nymphs."

"Tara, that is so cool—but unsuspecting?"

Too hot to be in our bags, we zipped them together and made a spread. In a tent small enough that our bodies touched in the dark. "I know what you're wanting Alex, and the answer's no."

"Can we kiss goodnight?"

"Sure, but first we call your wife and tell her you have a new friend. And did she really mean you can have a girlfriend when you travel? Goodnight Alex," she said, turning away from me.

I lay there hoping she'd change her mind, until her tiny snoring found space in the quiet. I tried to sleep but thoughts kept coming. I practiced the *cloudless* sky, which was effective as hopeless nonsense. Finally, convincing myself I would rather be here than somewhere else, things became disjointed, then hazed, and I drifted into the obscure.

8

“If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses.” Henry Ford

There's something about sleeping in a tent. You go to bed early and you wake up early. This morning I beat Tara out of the tent by almost an hour. I had to get out because sleeping against a beautiful woman who wants you to be her friend has its limitations. When she did appear, in a tee shirt and panties, stretching to the contrails and running fingers through her hair, all beautiful women, everywhere, had an unaccounted moment of self-doubt.

"What're you thinking?" she asked. I told her.

"No, I mean about today. What's the plan?"

"Let's get out of here in the next ten minutes."

"Are you kidding? Ten minutes?"

"Okay, twelve."

A half hour later, I started the car, and we eased through the campgrounds.

"Where to?" she asked.

"Let me surprise you," I said, driving past Furnace Creek, heading north up the valley, through an hour of dips, taken with enough speed that we gauged each by the pits of our stomachs. When we pulled into Scotty's Castle, Tara looked at me inquiringly?

"We have to be in Vegas at six and I don't want to be there early, so I thought we'd have a look around." We walked to the ticket booth where I explained to the ranger that we had an early flight from McCarran and I wanted my daughter to be able to see something of the castle. Could we buy tickets now and walk around the grounds for fifteen minutes instead of taking the tour? She asked if I'd been in before. I had. She walked us to the entrance, reminding us to be mindful and unlocked the door. The dozen or so tourists, waiting for the next tour, looked at us like we were celebrities. We strolled around with me telling about Scotty being a *mover and a*

shaker—a most lovable con man. How his friendship became indispensable to rich men from the East Coast, men who financed his incredible building project and visited him frequently. They thought they were investing in a gold mine but they were investing in Scotty and his monument to this land. There was no harm done. Everybody got more than money in the bargain and Scotty did his part by not living in the castle. He had more modest accommodations nearby.

Coming up out of Death Valley through the north portal, the road twists, then rises sharply, making for Route 95, the road from Vegas to Reno. A mile into the ascent, we passed a black Chevy, maybe a Tahoe, windows tinted more than what's legal. Feds. Why are they so obvious? I slowed down to see if they'd turn around, which they did, making a dangerous u-turn in the middle of a curve, which unfortunately didn't induce the gods to have them t-boned by a truck. Tara looked to me but said nothing. I accelerated as my mind picked up speed. This Tahoe was different from the CHP. These were Swamis' boys, maybe even him, and they had less rules to follow—more cards to play. But we were in the fastest production car of it's time, pursued by a piece of shit Chevy (with all deference to General Motors, an iconic player in our wheeled history) that had no chance of staying with the Ford. Through the turns the Ford was clumsy, but anytime the road straightened, we increased the distance between us. I pushed the limits, keeping in mind that car races are won incrementally and lost in disasters. All we needed was to arrive at 95 with enough of a lead that they couldn't see which direction we took. Now we were back in Nevada—a *stand your ground* state? Approaching 95, I scoped the road in both directions, trading some tire life to make the turn north at seventy-five miles an hour, regretting the skid marks I was leaving, but the ineptness of our pursuer's u-turn and their attachment to an opinion we were headed south offered the possibility they wouldn't notice and head south. I took the Ford up to 130, vigilant on the horizon.

We climbed to Goldfield. I slowed to forty, giving Tara a history lesson: This used to be a gold mining town with more than 30,000 inhabitants until it burned to the ground during a one night fire in 1924. I pointed out the hotel and high school, two masonry buildings that survived the fire. How Wyatt and Virgil Earp came there in 1904, with Virgil serving as deputy sheriff, until he died here, of pneumonia, in 1905, leaving Wyatt the only survivor from the Gunfight at the O.K. Corral.

Now we were climbing for Tonopah's 6200 foot summit. We drove through town slowly, not too slowly, with me watching the rearview mirror more than the road ahead. I made a left and parked behind a row of stores on the east side of the highway. Tara hadn't said a word since Death Valley.

"What are we doing here?" she asked.

"Cowboy boots!"

"Cowboy boots?" she asked,

"Yeah, I don't want to get to Vegas until six and I'm hoping the Feds figure us for going south. That leaves Tonopah. I was here last year. There's a western shop that has some boots."

Heading towards the back of the shop where they kept the boots, I reminded the owner of my last visit and he recognized me. The boots I'd been checking out were Twisted X—*designed by cowboys—for cowboys!* The only boots I ever bought were Tony Lama work boots, a brown, tall boot with narrow toes for riding. I don't find them anymore but lately I bought a newish pair at a local shoe repair place for ninety dollars. Before leaving on this trip, I gave them to my friend Jake because I can't wear them. Whatever's going on with my feet is made worse by narrow toes. The Twisted X, on the other hand, are a well-made boot with a rounded toe. The craftsmanship and leather are superb, and the upper boot is a darker color with beautiful stitching. Which goes against my Spartan ways, but beauty combined with function trumps asceticism.

"I can't remember your name?" I asked the owner.

"Randy."

"Do you have a size eleven in the back Randy?" The pair on display was an eight and a half. "You ever had cowboy boots Tara?"

"Threatened to, a couple of times."

"Really, what size do you wear?"

"Eight and a half."

Randy came back with two boxes, a ten and a half and an eleven. I didn't want boots too small so I tried the eleven. They fit well, with just a little bit of slip and no more. What a guy wants for boot heels slipping on the dance floor sand. I liked them.

"How much Randy?"

"\$179."

"That's plus tax right?" I always ask because we don't pay sales tax in Oregon.

"Yeah, plus tax."

"Any other brands?"

"I have this other brand for \$89." He went to get them.

"Try them on Tara." She was reluctant. "Just try them—I want to see you in them." She sat down, pulled them on, and walked around the store.

"The heel's more like a regular boot, way more comfortable than classic cowboy boots," she said. Randy was back with the second-raters I tried on—uncomfortable junk. I put the Twisted X back on and asked Randy for a deal. He thought about it and offered ten percent. Sounded fair.

"So what's a guy do in Tonopah, Randy?"

"Well, I've had the shop for twenty-five years, married my wife and raised my kids here. Now I'm running for Justice of the Peace." I liked that. Instead of something institutional sounding, like District Attorney—Justice of the Peace.

"That sounds more humane than D.A.," I said.

"It does, doesn't it?"

Lately, I'd been thinking about our justice system. How our bill of rights is about procedure rather than justice. That's why, even with new evidence showing someone to be innocent, as long as they've had a fair trial—tough luck! I read somewhere where other

countries patterned their constitutions on ours, but focused more on justice than procedure.

"You have a chance of winning Randy?" There was compassion in the way he talked about the law. I hope he wins. I'm going to check back in the fall. "How much for two pair Randy?" Tara balked and I turned away from her.

"On two pair, I could go \$320."

"Is that plus tax?"

"I'll split the tax with you." I shook his hand to seal the deal.

When we got back to the Ford, I said, "If you like the boots, and you sell the car, you can pay me back, but for now, I like you in them—makes you look about 5 foot 12."

With few eating options in Tonopah, we pulled behind McDonald's and went in. I ordered a salad with grilled chicken and Paul Newman dressing. Tara got the same. We took a table where we could see the highway but it couldn't see us.

"What's our plan?" asked Tara.

"Okay. We drive to Vegas without being seen (I laughed). We take the Ford to Art, who owns the car collection. You and Art discuss price and make an agreement to put the Ford in his collection where it will be for sale and not likely to be spotted by the authorities. Of course, this all depends on our being able to get the car into Vegas unnoticed."

"How much should I ask for the car?"

"I'm not sure." We heard the car's worth between 150 and 300 thousand and it's in Art's interest to get as much as he can, because the more he sells it for the more he makes."

"How much does he get?"

"Not sure of that either, but I'm thinking somewhere between twenty-five and forty percent."

"What!" she exclaimed. "That's big money."

"It is, and that's why the negotiation with Art is important. Keep in mind that Art has a much better chance of finding a buyer than we do."

It's a four hour drive to Vegas, at five miles an hour over the speed limit. Coming down out of Tonopah, I thought about our chances of not being spotted along the road when I remembered an obvious connection I hadn't thought about. I checked my phone to see if I had bars, which came and went, but better at the top of hills than on the upside or downside. The next time I had three bars I pulled over where I had a good view of the highway in both directions. My older son's friend Kurt is a sergeant with the Nevada Highway Patrol. He and his wife stayed at my house one night. I found his number in my contacts and called. He seemed pleased to hear from me and not on duty. After briefly telling him what was going on, he lost some enthusiasm.

"What do you want from me, Alex?"

"To know if there's an All Points Bulletin on the Ford, or either of us?"

"Is the woman listening to this conversation?"

"No. She's gone for a walk." At which point Tara opened her door and walked away from the car.

Kurt said he'd think about it and get back to me in the fifteen or twenty minutes. I thanked him and hung up. We drove on, down through Goldfield, without hearing from Kurt, then we lost service, which we didn't pick up again until we reached Beatty where my voicemail showed a message. I pulled into the service station and gave Tara money to fill up while I walked towards the casino listening to Kurt's message, which was to call him back. He picked up on the first ring.

"Alex, I didn't want to tell you what I found on voicemail. In fact, I don't want to be having this conversation at all. So this conversation never happened and there will be no future calls. There'll be a phone record you called and what you called about is your visit to Vegas tonight with your invitation to get together for a drink. If you had any reason other than friendship to get together, you never expressed it and I declined the drink because I'm working tonight. That said, what's on the Ford is a BOL, which is Be On Lookout, and an ATL, Attempt To Locate, which changed this afternoon to an APB/APW, which is an All Points Bulletin, an All

Ports Warning, based upon *flight to resist arrest*, and *felony speeding*. The Ford vehicle with Louisiana plates is identified, and two suspects, Tara Constance Comstock, and Alex Westbend, are being sought. Westbend is to be considered armed and dangerous. He may be holding Comstock against her will.”

I thanked Kurt and hung up, then went online to one of those *ask legal questions sites*, with a question whether it's ever permissible to flee the authorities? What came up was this paragraph: "Fleeing from an officer is legal as long as you know that the officer is not arresting (or attempting to arrest) you—or—if you have no other legal duty under law to stop. One can also resist an arrest they believe to be unlawful—but cannot use force to injure the officer—or deadly weapons." When the Feds made their u-turn, we hadn't been speeding and we knew from our earlier police stops, the instructions were to locate and report—nothing more. At the time the Tahoe turned around to pursue us we had no way of knowing it was the police. There were no lights or siren, therefore no crime was committed. The APB/APW came out of that incident and since there was no prior crime we had no responsibility to stop, under the law. Thinking it through made me feel better until I remembered a talk I had with my friend Barry, who had a business advising clients on the best ways to hide money offshore—evading taxes. He assured me it was perfectly legal and there was no way he could be charged with a crime. "Charged with a crime, what are you talking about?" I said. "This is about money and power. The powers that be won't let you win the good fight. Dick Cheney's gonna hit you in the face with a claw hammer!" They all got busted. Several did hard time. Those memories obliterated any well-being I'd gained online.

The car wasn't at the pumps so I went looking out back, but it wasn't there either. Then I saw Tara inside the store—the Death Valley Fruit and Nut Company, the biggest dried fruit, nut, and candy store in Nevada.

"What'd you do with the car, Constance?"

"Oh shit," she replied, realizing the consequence of my knowing her middle name. I told her what I'd found out.

"Did you move the car as a precaution?" With her chin as a pointer, she indicated two highway patrolmen at the Subway, in the far end of the vast store.

"Did you see where they parked?"

"Better than that, they came from the south."

We moved into the endless dried fruit and bulk candy aisles where we could make like shoppers and maintain surveillance. Luckily, they got their lunch to go and headed north. We walked to the car behind the Motel 6. I asked Tara to drive while I looked at the map. We needed to get off 95 to have any chance of getting into Vegas without being spotted. We had three choices, head into Death Valley now, which would get us into Vegas way late, or head south thirty miles to 373 at Amargosa Valley, then west, or chance another twenty miles on 95 to 160, which would be the fastest. We could probably make the thirty miles, maybe the fifty, depending on the timing of patrols. As someone who pushes the edge, I opted for the fifty miles. I made a little laugh. Tara asked what was funny? I told her I was a bit of an asshole. She nodded in agreement.

Wherever we had visibility we ran about 85 and when we didn't we ran 70. Not that it mattered, since we were getting stopped by the first cop, but it's always fun to have science and statistics as part of your plan. We made it to 160 and headed towards Pahrump, which brought a memory. When my youngest was eight, he was as headstrong as he is now, at seventeen. We were in a pawn shop in Tonopah where he spotted a BB gun he wanted. He was raising all kinds of hell around it. I told him he could have one but not this one shot thing that was obsolete when I was a kid. He sat beside me leaving Tonopah, surly and mean, all the way to Pahrump and the Ace Hardware Store where the Daisy rifles were kept in a locked case. "There's only one that matters son," I said, "the Red Ryder Carbine". That's what we got and he's been ever-grudgedly thankful that we drove the two hours to get the good one.

Entering Pharrump I was amazed, but not surprised. Since I'd last been to this little town, they'd rolled out the strip mall pattern. All authenticity was gone, replaced by Olive Garden faux culture. But there wasn't time to reflect on American decadence as a Pharrump P.D. unit shot out of a parking lot, two cars behind us—like some kind of slot car. At the signal, we made it through but they didn't. A cross-traffic UPS truck forced them to stop on the red. The next intersections were 372 back to Death Valley, or 160 to Vegas. I could see the cop on the radio. I told Tara to turn for Death Valley.

She began to question and I barked, "Do what I say, goddamnit!" She did, but with a *you will pay later look* attached to it. "Get on it, California's just a few miles." She took it up over 100 while I kept watch behind us. I saw the cop once and then we were in California. At the first ranch gate, we hung a dusty right, drove up out of sight, turned around, and rumbled back to where we could get out and watch the road. We waited five minutes, during which a couple of icy glares were delivered.

"Tara, when it has to do with our safety—I decide! It's like swing dancing. Unless you're half of a lesbian couple, or a woman determined to live alone, you don't get to lead. and unless you're an idiot, you don't get to hold grudges when I'm trying to save your life. When it's not a dangerous situation we're equals—but when the shit flies..." She looked straight ahead:

"If we were equals, you would have gone back to your own bed."

We headed back the way we came, hoping the locals were content to radio us in and resume patrolling. With a bit of luck, they'd be looking in Death Valley and we could slip into Vegas. Through town I took short breaths but as soon as we reached the Nevada wilderness I took some *Willie* air into my solar plexus.

"Are we good Tara?"

"We're good but things are getting weird, all the way around."

Which made me think on how I'd planned to be gone two weeks. Now it looked as if it might take that long to get to New

Orleans. And getting to New Orleans had now become a subplot—replaced by Tara.

Without incident, we made it into Las Vegas and parked behind the Imperial Palace, from where I called Art to let him know we'd arrived. He came down, shook hands with me and introduced himself to Tara. He walked slowly around the car, opened the hood and trunk, looked underneath, on both sides, and the back. While he was making his inspection, a Las Vegas patrol car came down the alley and I tensed. They slowed almost to a stop, the cop in the passenger seat looking back. Art suggested we go up to his office and talk further. I told him I appreciated his suggestion but could we could put the car in the freight elevator now and I would explain once we were inside. Looking concerned, he drove the car into the elevator. Once the freight door was closed, he said, "I've been consigning vehicles long enough to know it doesn't always work out. So, why do you want to leave the car with me and why are we in the elevator before we have a deal?" I thought, *why not*, and told him the whole story with Tara filling in as we went.

Art's only concerns were legal and once we talked through the car ownership and registration, he seemed satisfied. He got out of the Ford and pushed the elevator button for the sixth floor where the collection is housed. He said he needed a car for a year to make a good sale. That gave him the time to foster continuity and turnover in the collection, enticing visitors to visit each time they came to Vegas.

"So Tara, what do you think about a year?"

"A year's fine with me Art. What will you ask for the car?"

"Good question!" he said. "From what I've seen, it's a splendid example of the 406. I did some research earlier and I think 220 thousand is a possibility, but a reach. And I don't dicker. I do all the work preparing, displaying, merchandizing, and selling the car. For that I charge twenty-five percent of what we get. Tara, if I sell the car, you'll get a minimum of 150 thousand, possibly more. Be assured, if I get more, you'll get your seventy-five percent. I can have a contract for you in the morning."

"Two things, Art," I said. "Tara's low on funds, so what do you think about ten thousand in cash as part of the agreement? Also, we need a room here tonight, not in our names."

He thought for a moment, "The room's not a problem. Tara, I'll give you five thousand in cash, which will come out of your end of the sale, or if it doesn't sell, you need to pay me back, plus five percent interest on the five thousand, in cash, before you take the car back." I could tell Tara liked it that Art talked to her and not me. They shook hands.

We took the elevator down to the casino in high spirits. The Imperial Palace is one of the less glitzy spots on the Strip, and it was obvious the way Tara was talking that she wanted some action. We walked through the casino to the doors that led out to the strip. It was dark now but the air was warm, a good night for walking. About twenty feet beyond the door, a guy with a buzzed head, in a dark suit, wearing an earpiece, was watching us as we came towards him. I took Tara's hand and wheeled us back inside. We walked quickly across the casino floor to a bar with many tables—mostly occupied. We went in, picked a table in the midst of the drinkers and sat down. When the waitress came around I ordered two Molson's.

"Why're we here?" asked Tara.

"The guy on the sidewalk's a Fed, which means the Tahoe came south to Vegas looking for us. Those Vegas cops in the alley saw the APB on the Ford and it's occupants, but when they came back, the car was gone. Now they're looking for us and the search begins here."

Before our waitress had time to bring drinks, the guy in the suit and a second guy with the same haircut and dark suit, but shorter, were standing outside the bar railing looking at us. Between them, in baggy shorts and a Hawaiian shirt, with shades across his thick curly hair, was Swamis, looking for all the world like he'd just run into his two best friends. Keeping us in sight, they walked along the railing towards the seating entrance. Tara put her hand on my arm.

"Keep in mind dear one, reticence is a virtue, a patience of the spoken word. You can always say something but you can't always take it back." I looked at her, as I might if the Muse herself were sitting across from me.

"You," I said, "who would proscribe my tongue with your prescriptions on my descriptive spirit, cannot placate my sedition of tyranny nor purvey my station..." Our three friends had spread out and approached, as I stood up, one hand in my waist pack, my right palm in their faces, holding them back while I finished, "to become a sycophant to this aspersion of Caesar." The three of them looked at me as if I were mad. I touched a passing barmaid on the shoulder.

"My brother and his bodyguards will be joining us, so if you could have one more chair brought to our table?" She looked at them with apprehension.

Waiting for the chair, Tara moved to my side of the table so we could *enjoy them instead of looking at each other*. The chair arrived and we all sat down.

"You guys like a beer?" I asked, "Tara's treat." I nodded in her direction, conveying it was important to maintain communication between the two of us. I motioned to the waitress and ordered three more Molson's.

"I'm not drinking with you," said Swamis. He seemed non-plussed by my conduct. So I kept it up.

"When we were together last, you forgot to offer me a drink and I want to be a good host. I can understand if drinking would maybe take you off your game, or if your friends here can't drink on taxpayer time—thinking I might turn them in?"

He was losing control, scarcely able to keep himself in check, causing a near-meltdown at the table. I tried calming it through non-aggressive eye-contact with the two Feds.

"You guys know who you're working for?" Swamis' eyes bored into me. "Swamis' a psychopath, who'll do whatever's needed for his perversions."

At any second I expected he'd come across the table and I fucking cared less. Like motorcycle trips that I knew would be danger-

ous, I had made the choice to be there. Now I was choosing to be here! It was all on the line and my only goal was to do nothing I would later regret.

"Tara, take a walk and call the hotel about our room. Have a cab meet us out front in twenty minutes."

"She's not going anywhere," cursed Swamis, under his breath.

"Two things Paul: first, you don't tell either of us what to do—not ever. You're less than nothing to me and I'm not afraid of you. Any crimes committed, have been committed by you, and yours," I said, giving a nod to the Feds. "I wonder if these guys know how little you care about other people, including them, and how little you respect your country?" He began to speak but I talked over him: "We're at my party tonight and we're in a *stand your ground* state, where I've been harassed and threatened by you. That stops here! You've told the world I'm armed and dangerous. That's true. I'm armed because I'm authorized to carry a concealed weapon, and dangerous because I'll use it when I'm threatened."

He stood up. The two Feds were one drop of rain in a squall from going for their weapons. I played my last card, loudly, so everyone in the place would hear:

"I said two things Paul: the second is you're a piece of shit and if you ever threaten my girlfriend or me again, I'll shoot you dead and pray for mercy from the great State of Nevada."

It was obvious he wasn't carrying, the way he lunged for me and had to be restrained by his minions.

"Put a leash on that rabid dog," I yelled, as they walked their catatonic package towards the street.

Art had pulled out all the stops for our room, which helped to make up for what had just happened—though I wasn't totally disappointed with the bar scene. We had two queen beds, one in an alcove off the main room. Each room had its own flat screen and the bedspreads were quality, not something that took you back to your great aunt's's drapes. Plus a stocked refrigerator, (the kind where everything costs more than it's worth and goes on your bill), a mi-

crowave, coffee, and a walk-in, field-stone shower with two white cotton robes.

The phone rang and we both froze. When she moved to answer it, I raised a hand.

"Let's wait. They'll leave a message." Soon the red buzzer began flashing and I picked up the headset. It was a message from Art: within reason we could use room service as well as the food and drink in the room. He'd be around in the morning if we needed anything. Our gear had been brought to the room and I began carrying mine to the smaller room.

"I'll take the alcove," I said.

"It doesn't matter, I'm not sleeping alone," she said. "If you sleep in there, I'll be sleeping here with someone else."

"You really know how to make a guy feel wanted."

"I just know I don't want to be alone tonight," she said. I pulled a chair around to where I was facing where she sat on the bed.

"How you doin'?"

"Surprisingly well," she said. "I found myself wanting you to keep pushing him. The more you did it, the less I was afraid. Why do you think that was?"

"Because he's a bully and bullies control people by keeping them afraid. When you stand up to them they lose it."

"Weren't you scared?" she asked.

"Yeah, for both of us, but I saw my fight plan early and I had to stay with it."

"How'd you know Nevada's a *stand your ground* state?"

"I don't, but I assume it is."

"Alex, I don't like people walking around with concealed weapons and standing their ground."

"Odd, isn't it?" I said. "The Second Amendment was made to protect citizens from the corruption of government, but instead people carry to protect themselves from each other. You and I are the Constitutional poster children, protecting ourselves from the government and the cops, for crimes of beauty and questioning?"

"It's strange Alex!"

"It is strange. We've grown up relying on our government, and now...".

"Would you have killed him?"

"Yeah."

"Now what do we do?" she asked.

"I don't know? They don't know where the car is, or that we won't be using it. That gives us an edge, as long as we can get out of town some other way."

"You think they know we're staying in this hotel?"

"I don't think so but I think we need to leave by the freight elevator in the morning."

"What then?" she asked.

"New Orleans! Back roads, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas. A good vacation! We deserve it. So let's celebrate tonight!"

"Celebrate what?" she asked.

"That there's people after us, our own government, and we can't see any way out!" I laughed. It was a good laugh, except in the middle of it, she slapped my face hard and started to cry. I moved to the bed and held her. I didn't say anything, just held her while she cried it out.

"I don't know what happened? When you laughed, I snapped. How can you be so cool about this?"

"I'm not cool about it Tara. When I think about how this might play out and I don't see a good result, I try to make fun of it. In bad situations I go back to something else I remember about John Lennon. When he was five years old, his mother told him that happiness was the key to life, so at school, when they asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up, he wrote down *happy*. They told him he didn't understand the assignment and he told them they didn't understand life. Tara, I'm keeping my happiness, even if I have to glean it, a bit here and a bit there."

"You can't take them on Alex! They're the fucking government!"

"It doesn't matter," I said. "Attitude is everything. No matter the outcome. This isn't the first time I've been in a bad place. If I had

to trade one finger for every time I've gone past the edge, I'd be scratching my ass with my wrist."

I wanted a shower so I asked her to order dinner for both of us. She said I should give her some suggestions but I declined. The shower was good, clean and spacious, not like those forty dollar gems I frequent. I mussed up my hair and put on my robe. While we waited for the food, Tara took a shower and I moved things around so we could eat and watch TV. When she came out in her white robe, I'd pushed the bed to one side and set up the table with two chairs in front of the flat screen. I was on HBO watching *Cathouse*.

There was a knock at the door. In the peephole, there was a guy from room service. I took the cart, asked if he would wait a moment, and closed the door. I transferred the items from the cart onto our table and returned the cart with a ten dollar bill, looking both ways down the hall before closing the door. Tara had chosen well: two caesar salads, salmon steaks, no potatoes, and a hot loaf of whole wheat bread with butter. Plus a cold, covered dish, with two pieces of lemon meringue pie. I opened a bottle of white wine and poured a glass, asking if she wanted one? She didn't.

"Tell me the genetic strategies of these people on *Cathouse*?" she asked.

"You seen it?" I asked.

"Maybe twice."

"Okay, the bald guy's the pimp. His strategy is to fuck all the girls, without alienating his wife too much, while getting visitors to pay through the nose for some pussy or other fantasies."

"How about his wife?" she asked.

"Maybe her goal is to not be thrown under the bus."

"What about the guys who come to *Cathouse*?"

"Looking for fun, or love, in all the wrong places."

"Maybe they'll find it?" she said.

"From girls who get 500 bucks a half hour, six times a day. Good luck."

"And the girls?"

"Mostly money."

“What’s my strategy?” she asked.

“That’s a hard one. I think you have doubts about finding someone who loves you as much as I do. So your strategy is to find a guy who loves you, who’s age appropriate and will have children with you.”

“Jesus, I sound like every dull bitch I ever knew.” We both laughed.

“Except, the guy’s gonna have to make money, or you need to, because you’re acquiring a taste for the good life. He’ll have to be fearless and protect you, beyond imagination, or you’ll be thinking about me. And he’ll need a huge sense of adventure to satisfy you. Oh yeah, he’ll have to know about that oral thing you like from behind.”

“You fucking idiot,” she said, through a mouthful of salad and salmon. “You make it sound hopeless!”

“Hopeless? You have most of what you need right here!”

“You mean with the wrong guy, who’s married and too old for me?”

“Tara, is the problem with my being older and married like the situation with Swamis—that there’s no way to resolve it? What if I weren’t married, how would that affect older? Because, older is what I am. It’s the one thing that can’t change. So if my age is a deal breaker...”

“Honestly Alex, it would be hard to find what I have with you...”

“So, it’s not a deal breaker?”

“Maybe not,” she said.

“Thank god for that, cause every time you say old, I see myself in the *death line*.”

She laughed. “What’s the *death line*?”

“That’s where they cut holes in plywood walls along the sidewalk at construction sites so old guys can see what’s going on. Other *death line* attractions include: comfort food, big bellies, La-Z-Boy recliners, no songs on your phone, or songs you don’t listen to anymore, AARP cards and AAA stickers.” I stopped to savor the last of my salmon and one more slice of yet warm bread.

“So that leaves us with at least one irresolvable issue,” she said. “Possibly. But I’m looking at this, as a paradox, not a contradiction.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Paradoxes are resolvable!”

“Then you know nothing about women, Alex!”

“Maybe, but like our situation with Swamis, we need to suspend judgement, because we don’t know how this will play out.”

“Fine,” she said, “but no more sex until it plays out!”

“That’s your choice, but I’m not staying if we stop being lovers—unless you pay me to take care of you.”

"You're a fucking bastard!"

"No, I'm not. I'm an honest man. You think if you put me in my place I'll become some accommodating father figure, risking my life to protect you, while you strategize your future. Like they say in Vegas—*not in the cards baby.*"

"So you're blackmailing me for sex?"

"Not at all, there's two beds here and I don't have to be here after tonight."

"If we do this your way, what happens when I meet a younger man. How's that going to be for you?"

“Fine. Cause that's not going to happen. If it does, I'm gone.”

"So I'm your girlfriend even if I don't want to be?"

"No, I'm telling you the rules I'm playing by. You want different rules, you need to find another game."

"I think you're a deluded, son-of-a-bitch," she said, pouring herself a glass of wine.

I'd set up the dinner so we could watch TV but we didn't. On her face was some of that Golden Canyon gloom. Except her's was psychological. I had a thought and went online.

"C'mon, we only have a few minutes!"

"A few minutes for what?"

"No time! Put on your best and let's go!" I think she must have needed the change, because in two minutes she'd put on a short,

black dress, her boots, and messed with her hair. I stood there gawking at her.

"What?"

"Nothing," I said, dragging her to the door. "We gotta go, cause I want to stay home now."

"What about Swamis? You said we would be safer to stay in the room?"

"Right, but the now trumped that!"

"They're looking for us and we're going out on the town?" she asked.

"Like my dad used to say, 'plenty of room for em'!"

Our moods changed as we rode the elevator down, much better to be out of the room, but we grew pensive when we reached the casino floor.

"They think we're staying someplace else," I said. "I think we played that well. If they know we're here, we're screwed anyway. Best we know it tonight." Crossing the casino, we headed away from the Strip, out a door to the back, which put us into a busy, outside walkway from which we could approach the Strip with discretion.

"Where're we going?" she asked.

"Just give me five minutes. You're going to love this."

We were in luck. The Mirage was almost directly across the Strip from us.

Crossing the boulevard, she took my arm and asked, "Are you armed?"

"As it happens," I responded, taking her hand and patting my waist pack in back of my motorcycle jacket. We went through the doors of the casino and I asked a security guard for directions to The Cirque de Soleil. I wondered if I would hate it. I don't like huge, theatrical productions. I find them to be a waste of time, but it would get our mind off things. We found the box office, unstaffed, with a sold out sign. Damn, we needed this distraction. I looked around for scalpers and saw one talking with a couple. I guided Tara to them as the buyer was saying, "At the box office,

they sell tickets for seventy-nine dollars, so how can you ask \$146 per ticket?" The scalper showed him the ticket with the face-value printed on it—\$146. The buyer waved him off: "The most I'll pay is \$100." That was my opening.

"The most he'll pay is \$100 and I'll pay face-value." The buyer got aggressive with me.

"I'm doing a deal here and you need to stay out of it!"

"Your deal's done." I said. "You set your limit, so this guy can take your \$100 or my \$146. But if he wants to dicker with you, I need to find someone to do business with." This thing with Swamis was forging in me, behaviors of expediency. Where was the easy-going Alex—the laid back Alex? Replaced, with a full-throttle *stand your ground* Alex.

"No, no," said the scalper. "You got em!" The guy was looking bad in front his girlfriend and I felt for him. He looked like he might take it to another level until his girlfriend pulled him away.

"Forget it! I never liked the damn Beatles anyway."

They walked away and I whispered to Tara, "You don't judge the Beatles lady. They judge you."

I gave the man three, one-hundred dollar bills. Of course he had no change. We found our seats with maybe five minutes before the nine-thirty performance and really good seats they were. I spun my waist pack to the front as we sat down. Tara leaned into me.

"How'd you make that happen?"

"Wasn't difficult. Those tickets were ours, no matter what. Getting tickets is much easier than dealing with you." We sat in silence for a moment.

"Tara, are you attracted to me?"

"Tonight with Swamis," she said, "and now with the tickets, there's something about you..."

"No Tara! Are you attracted to me as a man?"

"Dude," she said. "What am I describing but a man?"

"Don't call me dude when I'm asking something serious, Tara."

"Dude. Dude. Dude. Dude," she said, a bit too loud. "Don't tell me what I can say, and fucking not say!"

The music was beginning. Our neighbors, in front and on both sides, glanced at us nervously. I wished I were someplace else. She could just as well be describing what attracted her to Captain Sully, landing his jet on the Hudson, saving all those people. But that wouldn't get her legs wrapped around my waist—her wetness against my stomach. She leaned over to me and kissed me ever so lightly on the ear. I could smell her youth, mixed with wine, in her hot breath.

"If you need to know, I like to look at your face, I love your nose, I think you're handsome. I like your muscles and your stomach. But that doesn't help me when I think about your wife or when I think it won't be long before you'll need help getting out of the car."

The lights came up and soon there were more than twenty people on the stage, running and jumping—generally acting ridiculous. This went on for a minute or two, as words like tawdry and meaningless waltzed across my mind, but slowly those words were pushed aside, incrementally, by extraordinarily visual beauty and a perfection of human physicality I didn't think possible, backed by a perfect sound system, with Beatles renditions, by the Beatles, not quite the recordings we all know—but close. The Beatles had performed together in Hamburg for so long they rarely missed a note, which added to the wonder of the majesty unfolding below, where slowly, against my will, I was being overcome by a visual splendor. A Volkswagen beetle would come together then go apart, cast members working together with an almost implausible unity, each carrying a part of the whole: a fender, a hood, a door, the body. Performers, one after another, accomplished unlikely feats, building to a finale, a crescendo of acrobats hurtling through space, the top of a red, English phone box, their landing and jump-off platform! I could imagine the landing as a possibility, once, maybe twice, but time after time? It was the equivalent of an NBA player making thirty, three-pointers, one after another, in overtime. *And in the end*, what I felt was gratitude. Of everyone in the audience, I

was likely the most appreciative, having come from deep, negative preconceptions, to a state of grace.

We sat until everyone was gone, without talking. Walking back towards the Strip, Tara asked me if I'd liked it? I described my experience until her smile became so full her face could hardly contain it. At the crosswalk, I pointed out one of the suits in front of our hotel. We turned and walked back to the Mirage, getting into the first open cab. I showed the driver where we needed to go and which driveway to take.

He said, "You mean right there, across the street?"

"Yeah, that's the one."

"I have to drive farther to turn around than you'd have to walk."
"No problem," I said.

We pulled into traffic and I pulled Tara to me and down, to where we weren't visible from the street. I began to kiss her, gently at first, then with passion. I whispered that she live these next two minutes as a role in a play, but really get into it, because the audience could tell if she were acting.

She kissed me on the neck and asked, "Are you thinking of this as a play?"

"Hadn't thought about it," I said. "Too busy hoping he catches red lights."

He pulled up to the side entrance. I gave him ten dollars and thanked him. We went in, crossing the lobby to the elevators. I was hoping for stairs so we wouldn't have to stop but an open elevator was waiting for us.

Once in the room, with the *Privacy Please* in place and the deadbolt turned, she asked, "Will you really leave if we aren't lovers?"

"It would be better, don't you think? I mean, if we hadn't already been lovers and I was like an older brother..."

"Older brother?" she laughed. "Who the fuck has an older brother that's thirty-two years older?"

"My youngest has one more than twenty years so I guess it's possible?"

"What happens if I fall in love with you?"

"You think you might?" I said, trying to catch a breath.

"What if I get pregnant?"

"That can't happen."

"You're fixed?"

"Yeah..."

She stood there looking me in the eyes, my boots off, hers still on, which made us closer to the same height. I could see her weighing options until she hit me hard on the chest with both open palms, sending me backwards onto the bed. Without turning off the lights, she took off her LBD, her bra, slipped her panties over her boots, one leg at a time, without taking them off, and stood there—in nothing but boots.

"I'm keeping my boots on." I kept looking at her, engraving the moment into my forever.

"I like that you don't shave. Shaved, they look like little animals with no place to hide."

"You gonna talk all night cowboy?"

"I'm not, but I have all night to make you want to do this again tomorrow."

An hour later, we were spent and satiated, but knowing this might never happen again, I lifted her to her feet, the boots still on, and bent her over with her palms on the bed. I reached for pillows to kneel on and pulled her cowboy boots apart. With my knees on the stacked pillows, I put my mouth on her now pungent vagina and worked into it, with kisses, fingers and my tongue. She'd already come twice, hard. Now I was free to explore and enjoy myself and I wanted to remember this night for a long time. I can't remember how old I was when I first decided I liked to eat pussy. Liking it means you can take time with the little things. And women know. My world became her legs, her hips, her bush, and I wasn't going to stop until she made me. She started to moan, getting back to that place, until everything on her shuddered but the boots, and she let loose a riot of profanity that shot adrenalin and fear through me—and I laughed. She twisted around, looking back at me with what I assumed was mock anger.

"What the fuck are you laughing at? I'm bent over a bed in cowboy boots with your face in my pussy, and you're laughing?" This wasn't mock anger. She was pissed. I had to be careful.

"I'm not laughing at you," I said, raising my hands in surrender. She sat on a completely disheveled and damp bed, shifting about for a dry spot.

"I'm not sleeping in this bed!" she said, going to the alcove bed and getting in, without brushing her teeth, or taking a shower. I peed and got in, spooned against her dank, musky body, following her even breaths into folds of sleep.

9

When the queen's spirit darkens, there's nowhere for the jester to hide.

Tara came out of the bathroom in a large, white towel, drying herself as she walked across the room. She put on her robe, turned the armchair towards the bed and sat down.

"How are you?" she asked.

"Good. A bit sleepy."

"You're not allowed to be sleepy. You have to protect me—services rendered!"

The phone rang. It was Art saying he'd have the contract and the cash in about a hour. He'd come up to the room. We ordered breakfast from room service. Tara suggested we pay Art for what we ate and drank. I liked how naturally Tara did the right thing.

"When I asked you about getting pregnant, you said it wasn't a problem but you weren't convincing?"

"Can't you just take my word that I can't get you pregnant?" She made a little laugh.

"No way. This sounds too good."

She could see I was uncomfortable and she showed little mercy. Maybe payback time for me barking orders. Her eyes took in the pleasure of my embarrassment but I used it to free myself. There's no way I'm being dominated by her beauty, or her youth.

"I'm not fixed—I'm altered." That's all I said. With her mouth open, she shook her head in frustration, indicating she needed clarity. Enjoying my plight, I meandered into a story:

"I love two wheels, as much as anybody ever has. Man's best invention was the bicycle, then the motorcycle. My father gave me his Renault *Dauphine* when I was sixteen. Before he got home from work I'd traded it for a BSA motorcycle. When you picked me up at Safeway I'd ridden my mountain bike, hard, 100 days in a row. Nothing feels better to me than crossing Russia on a motorcycle—except maybe you!"

"And you can't get me pregnant because?" she asked.

"Because of my age, and what I'd asked of my body, I couldn't pee. Urgency, without the relief of being able to pee, was driving me mad. Being dead began to look like the good alternative. Two urologists, each steeped in his inept, know-it-all bullshit, wanted to put me on drugs for the rest of my life."

"Can you just tell me why I won't get pregnant?"

"Dammit Tara, let me tell it—I'm almost there."

"Anyway, it worsened, until I found a young surgeon I trusted and convinced him to go ahead with laser surgery on my prostate to de-bulk it, to take the pressure off the urine tube."

"Can you pee now?"

"Yeah, I pee great and I don't have to take drugs."

"I'm assuming you're aware that pregnancy isn't caused by pee?" she said, with a mix of scorn and frustration.

"Keep having fun baby cause in a couple of decades you'll be seeing interesting things about your body."

"I'm sure I will, but I think you meant to say three decades. What troubles me more is that I may still be sitting here wondering why I don't have to worry about having your child?"

"When the prostate gets de-bulked there's a trade off. Because the procedure was successful, my manhood's all good and I don't

have to wear a diaper but the unavoidable consequence of de-bulking is the loss of the jet action that shoots..."

The frustration on her face turned to wide-eye astonishment. She laughed then she hooted, "You saying," she said, trying hard to control herself, "I'm fucking a guy who can't get me pregnant because he comes inside himself?" She laughed so hard, she fell off the chair onto the carpet and rolled on the floor.

"You little bitch." I said, and began laughing myself. She lay on her side with her hands on her stomach, struggling to speak.

"Where exactly is it you come cowboy?" she gasped, her shoulders and chest convulsing. I dropped to the carpet, folding her into my arms, and for no apparent reason, I kissed her hard on the mouth. She twisted to get free, laughing to where she could hardly breathe, showering my face with spittle each time she erupted. Just then, room service arrived and I went straight to the shower.

When I came out she was eating and I realized I'd had no concern about who'd been at the door. I needed to pay better attention.

"What you were saying about your feet being numb. You were thinking it was from motorcycles, too? You seem to be able to walk a long way."

"Yeah, I tend look at it as dying slowly, from the ground up. It's no big deal. You can't get pregnant, I can walk, and it feels every bit as good to make love as when I was twenty. And my feet, as long as it doesn't get to my knees—it's nothing."

"Doesn't it make you feel compromised?"

"Only by a couple of feet. Like if you lost a breast. You'd still have an incredible profile from one side and I'd have a good time on one nipple."

A few minutes later, Art arrived with the contract. They went over it while I listened. They signed and I witnessed. Art gave Tara an envelope with fifty, one-hundred dollar bills, two of which she offered back to him, which he declined.

"When the car sells," he said. "I'll remember." He asked what we wanted to do about transportation. I told him we needed a car.

"I have some cars," he said, and ran through a few until he mentioned a 92 Taurus wagon.

"How many miles?" I asked.

"I think right around a 100." Tara jumped in:

"Alex, you got to be kidding, a Taurus wagon?"

"What color Art?" He grimaced.

"It's an awful green."

"How much?"

"We can talk about it when the Ford sells."

"Am I in this conversation?" asked an annoyed Tara.

"You are," I said, "but one of the most inconspicuous cars on the road is a Taurus wagon and we can sleep in it." Tara blurted:

"I guess I'm just one lucky girl."

We agreed to meet Art in ninety minutes at the bottom of the freight elevator where he would have the title and the Taurus—washed. We organized our bags and put them by the door.

"Why were you laughing when you were behind me last night?" she asked, remembering her perturbed embarrassment.

"Because you came so hard it scared me!" That started her laughing again.

"Like you'd been caught doing something wrong. Isn't that what you said?" she asked, still laughing. "In the bar yesterday, I thought you might be the bravest man I ever knew."

"And now?"

"Now, I think you can take a joke better than any man I've ever met."

"Which do you prefer?"

"We're going to need both," she said. "Both, and more."

Two hours later we turned south from Henderson on Nevada 95 heading towards Searchlight. The Taurus was adequate, a smooth running automatic with the usual rattles. It was good to be leaving Las Vegas and this whole area. I'd queued up some Las Vegas songs on my iPhone and Tara was listening to them with ear buds. I could hear a faint, bluesy "Viva Las Vegas" by Shawn Colvin. When it finished she said, "My dad had the Elvis version but this is

better. I like it when someone does a song so differently—but so good."

"Yeah, like Hank Williams 3 doing 'Atlantic City'."

"Have we heard that?" she asked.

I was going to miss being able to plug my phone into the radio. "Where're we heading?" she asked.

"Right now, we're going down through Searchlight to Laughlin, then across the Colorado River into Arizona. But first we're stopping right here." I pulled into the nearly empty parking lot of a car audio shop. We got out and went in. It's amazing how inexpensive, radios, with a USB port and front auxiliary plug, have gotten. Within five minutes they had our car into one of the bays, swapping out our radio with a new Alpine for \$150. They said it would be less than an hour so we went for a walk. They called in about ten minutes. The radio was in and our speakers weren't bad.

We turned south, listening to Chet Atkins and Mark Knopfler doing "I'll See you in my Dreams". That changed the whole world for me.

"Do you like this?"

"No, I love this! Do we need to plan a route?" she asked, as John Fogerty and the Zac Brown Band made "Bad Moon Rising" into a guitar virtuosity.

"If there's places you want to see, sure, but if you're okay with me handling it down there, I'll just do it."

"Whataya mean *handling it down there*?"

"I'm just playing. It's what the gamekeeper says to Lady Chatterley about their sex, to let him handle it down there. Have you read DH Lawrence?"

"I read it in college and you don't get to handle it down there."

"I did last night—no complaints?"

"It's different when you start talking about handling it. If it just happens—fine, but when you try taking over some part of my life, you can forget it. That goes for security too. In the moment I'll defer to you so we're not pulling in opposite directions, but you're not in charge. Not now. Not ever!"

"I like that! It's what I said to Swamis."

"It's my pussy! I'll shave it if I feel like it."

"I was only saying I like that you don't shave. I wasn't trying to control you!"

"I think you're always trying to control," she said.

"Sometimes, when you're out of control, you need controlling," I replied.

Knowing Laughlin, I made my way between casinos and parked out behind In-N-Out Burger. We went in and ordered. Tara got a cheeseburger, fries, and a chocolate shake. I ordered a double with no cheese, no dressing, but mustard, ketchup, and onions. "Any fries or drink?" the clerk asked with the camaraderie of the In-N-Out staff.

"No thanks, just a cup for water."

"No fries, no shake, no dressing. Do you ever have any fun?" she queried. I smiled knowingly at her.

"Shut the fuck up!" she said.

We crossed the Colorado into Bullhead City, heading for Kingman, Arizona.

"Have you been on Route 66?"

"No, I've read about it and seen pictures. Are there still sections intact?"

"Yeah, the Route 66 Museum is at Kingman, not far from here. There's a section of 66 we can drive from there."

"I'd like that. I want to be entertained but I don't want to hear about my psychology, my family, economics, or the government. Tell me about riding across Russia. Tell me what was interesting?"

"Let me think? I didn't want to go alone so I went with five guys. Which was a mistake. The only one I liked was Cisco, from Chile. The summer before, he and I had made a three-week ride in the Andes. To Russia he brought along Andreas, who I didn't like. I brought Andy, who neither of us liked, and three more guys I'd met online from different places in North America. In South Korea, this one guy from Oklahoma would imitate how the Koreans talked, in

front of them, in a culture based on respect. He did it on the train from Inchon to Seoul. A woman, maybe forty-five, in a business suit, sitting next to me, gave me a hostile look, associating me with him. I looked at pictures on my phone and showed her a picture of my youngest and our dog. I asked if she had children? She asked if that guy was my friend? I told her he was an idiot. We talked for an hour and when the others wanted into our talk I shut them out. She showed me pictures of her teenage son with blue hair. Coming into Seoul she suggested lunch the next day. I told her we'd be gone. As she walked away, the guy from Oklahoma was stopping traffic with his outstretched arms on a major street, motioning for the Americans to cross.

"Are you bored yet?" I asked.

"No. I'll tell you when I am."

"The next day we took a bus to Sokcho, a port on the Pacific. This was the week when war with the North was imminent. I hadn't realized South Korea's populated areas are right up against the northern border, and how quickly the North could decimate Seoul. Sokcho was different from Seoul, not modern and hardly anyone spoke English.

I have to tell you about Andy. The year before I'd been to a motorcycle rally in Alberta. Riding around the campground a couple of times, looking for a good spot, Andy motioned me into his camp. We got on well and after he heard I wanted to ride around the world, he said he might want to go. When I got back home we talked on the phone. That should have given me pause. Sometimes when he answered the phone he sounded catatonic—barely alive. If we talked about politics or economics, he lectured. But since I needed a buddy to travel the world with..."

"Were you afraid to go alone?"

"Yeah, I was and I'm not sure why because the year before I rode alone from 300 miles above the Arctic Circle to the southernmost town in the world."

"I gotta ask? Did you start out alone?"

"Well not exactly. I rode down through Baja with a guy I'd met in the Arctic, and his girlfriend. They each had bikes but she hadn't

ridden before. The first day she had two accidents and he had what's called a *sympathy crash*, watching her go down in his rearview mirror."

Tara began laughing and said, "I'm sorry Alex. I'm not being insensitive but this is too funny. It's not her or them, it's you. Let me guess?" she asked. "You left them soon afterwards?"

"Yeah, I did. That evening."

"How did you tell them you were leaving?"

"Well, we got into Santa Rosalia, I told them about a special church but he seemed snippy and uninterested. Maybe he was embarrassed about what happened on the road? They went for a walk and they took a long time to..."

"When they came back you were gone?"

"Yeah, I had to make the ferry to the mainland and they were staying in Baja."

"Were they the only ones you rode with on that trip?"

"No, there was Hans."

"Oh, pray tell about Hans."

"He was already going to be in Central Mexico. He'd left his BMW there, with family. He was older, a German-Canadian. He'd gotten sick and gone back to Canada. Now he was back, heading to South America. It took us hours to get his bike from his relatives who advised me, several times, in confidence, to take care of Hans because he had problems. We started out, mid-afternoon, his bike piled high with gear, held in place with netting, his engine stalling every time the bike stopped. Evening came and I found a small motel along the road and waited for him. He said no to the motel because it didn't have air conditioning. Something he required. He also told me he couldn't eat in restaurants with hanging meat, and he hated noise. I wondered what he was doing in Mexico, where it's hard to find air conditioning, where meat hanging in restaurants is the norm, and cars equipped with loudspeakers patrol the streets? We rode on, hours into the night, dodging silvery sidewinders angling across the road. In the small hours we arrived at a town and found a motel with air but the whole town was celebrating a huge festival of *San-something*, with firecrackers, bands,

and loudspeakers, which went on all night. Hans seemed miffed at me. The next morning, at a clean, outdoor restaurant, I ordered before Hans noticed hanging meat and it made him sick."

Tara was laughing, sometimes hard. She made me repeat things at her command. Worse yet, I was trying to drive and I couldn't stop laughing either.

"We rode out of town before Hans spotted a restaurant that wasn't really open but might be open for a couple of gringos. Of course it took forever to get food because they weren't set up for business. We sat there for a long time before our food came and..."

"Alex," she blurted. "Alex! Just tell me! Did you leave him, and did you tell him you were leaving?"

"Let me tell you what..."

"Just answer the fucking question Alex! Did you tell him you were leaving or did you just leave?"

"After we ate..."

"Alex," she sobbed, "Did you tell him?"

"No! I went on without telling him. But listen! He'd already given most of our morning to breakfast during which he told me our partnership wasn't going to work because I was too good of a rider. We got back on the road and rode through one of those Mexican towns, the kind that are half a mile long and one block deep with speed bumps every few hundred feet called *topes*, where old cars, trucks, and taxis with wrecked springs, bump across, one wheel at a time. You take these opportunities to pass five cars, two taxis and a dump truck. Not Hans! He stayed behind the slowest taxi. I could see him in my mirrors, farther and farther back as I kept passing. I guess he was right. I was a better rider. I rode another three hundred miles that day and never saw him again."

Tara's laughing was making it hard for her to breathe so I pulled off the road. My own laughter was making me a danger on the road. When she found a little control, she couldn't look at me but asked in a quiet voice: "You never saw him again?"

"No, but I emailed him."

She started choking and pushed out of the car, staggering away from me. I watched her, fifty feet up the road, leaning against a

fence. She would quiet down then her ribs would begin to shake. After a time, she motioned me to come join her. I walked over and she tried to maintain an equilibrium.

"I gotta know?" she asked, "barking through a short, gasping laugh, "Yes or no? Did you leave Andy in Russia?"

"It's more complicated than that, Tara..." Which put her over the top and she fell to her knees, shrieking:

"Just tell me, just fucking tell me, did you leave and did you tell him you were leaving?"

"Let me tell you," I said. This was enough for her to flail her arms, motioning me to get away from her. When I didn't leave, she somehow pantomimed, if I stayed where she could see me, she'd have a heart attack and die, so I walked back towards the car.

Walking away, I yelled back, "You don't know the whole story!"

"Oh I know the whole story!" she yelled. "Cause I've had a front-row seat for you and Swamis! I get to hear how it'll work out because we're the good guys. Good guys die ugly, Alex!" She wasn't laughing now. She lay in the dirt like some crazed Greek woman, laughing insanely one moment, then beating her breasts when her dead son is carried in on his shield.

"And you talk about my family, my psychology Alex? What happened to you growing up, to produce a hapless optimist, with totally unrealistic expectations and a grandiose self-worth. Let me guess. You were beaten down so badly, you had to become the comic, a denier of reality, to make up for the love you never had. How'm I doing Alex? Good analysis, don't you think? I wanna hear about all those people you left, not now, but every time I hear your BS about us being the good guys and I need a good laugh between here and wherever the fuck we end up."

I walked back to where she had shifted to lean against the fence.

"You're not hearing...." I said. She cut me off:

"You're smart Alex but you need life to be less complicated than it is. For instance, your wife. You think this thing between us can work out. I know that's part of your plan, which means you're either deluded, or an idiot, which in your case may be the same thing!" She started laughing again. Maybe it wasn't laughing?

We were coming into Kingman and back to civilization because my phone reminded me I had voicemail. I put it on speaker. "Alex, I haven't met you. This is Belle, Art's wife. Art was taken for questioning this morning by Homeland Security. So far our lawyer hasn't been able to find out if he's charged with anything? They know you have the Taurus." Tara went ashen as we pulled behind the Route 66 Museum.

Many things about our history inspire me and Route 66 is one of them. After we checked out the exhibit I told Tara about a time I took my youngest, when he was seven or eight, to Harrahs' car collection, in Reno, which was much bigger than the one in Vegas. Getting our tickets to go in, a kindly, older woman who worked in the lobby, pointed out a flathead Ford V8 engine on a stand, speaking in that patronizing tone adults save for kids.

"And do you know what that is young man?" Without missing a beat, he sang a line from "Maybelline"—about nothing outrunning his flathead Ford.

"Is he named after the car?" she asked.

"Of course! Just like LaSalle and Studebaker and Merc."

The favorite son of Kingman is Andy Divine. There's many pictures of him in the museum. I was trying to tell her about the fifties TV show where he plays Jingles Jones, the sidekick of Wild Bill Hickok, but she looked at me askance. Then I tried the Jimmy Buffet line from "I wish I had a Pencil-Thin Mustache"—about an autographed picture of Andy Divine.

"Can you really be so out of touch to be talking about Wild Bill Hickup with what you just heard about Art?" She walked away. I guess you had to have been there.

We found a decent motel close to the museum with parking along the side. I prefer the older one-story motels that wear the name of the town, but it matters less and less as motels are sold by the original owners to Indians and other Southeast Asians. We were be-

coming experienced travelers, each with a motel bag on the back seat. Tara wanted a shower and I wanted a walk. Out back was a retaining wall with a path down to a stream. This looked like a walk where I wouldn't be spotted and I needed exercise but more than that I needed to talk with Carla. I got her voicemail. In the middle of my message she called back, "I was getting worried," she said. "I've only hear from you twice in more than a week." I apologized and told her most of what was going on. "I'm not understanding. What are you planning to do? You were going for two weeks to get a motorcycle and you're still in Arizona? It sounds open-ended. Do you know when you're coming home?" I told her I didn't know and asked if she was all right with my being gone for a while? "You have a son here," she said. "You're a father and you're needed." I reminded her it had been nearly two years since I'd been gone more than a week! "How can I deal with this?" she asked. "You're my husband. It's one thing when you go out on a motorcycle for six weeks, but I can't make sense of this? You don't owe Tara. She's giving you a ride. She needs to call her friends for help. It's not your responsibility. Is there something going on between you and Tara?" I told her no. This wasn't going well because I had nothing to say that resolved anything at all. Instead, I talked about how it would be unfair to abandon Tara. I would try to get things straightened out so I could head home. She wasn't appeased and the call faded away as we found less and less to say. Feeling like a real bastard, I thought about taking a picture of the first thirty-five year old woman I came across who wouldn't be a threat to my wife, and send it as a photo of Tara.

On my trips, when I was away from home for weeks, nothing happened to make problems for Carla. Far from it. Once I overheard a girlfriend asking her why she supported my being gone for such a long time? Carla told her I was like an Apache on a horse, riding off on a hunting party. Not a bad way to be seen by your wife of thirty years. Now my wife and I were at odds. Along with my intensely loyal son, who'd made it plain, if I ever did anything to hurt his mom, there would be consequences.

All told, I was beginning to feel less sure of myself. Not a good place with all that's going on. I thought about how Catholics distinguish their sins. One type are misdemeanors. The other kind are the felonies. Misdemeanors are sins of omission, and felonies, sins of commission. Not telling Carla about Tara, that's omission, but telling her nothing's going on—that's commission. I had to come clean. I was thinking how best to do it when I got a text from Carla: "Walking Kobe around the block. Stopped to talk with Alanna. She saw you getting into a big car at Safeway—really good-looking woman."

Back at the room, Tara sensed something was wrong.

"Is the text from Art's wife getting to you?"

"It is, but it's more than that. You're right about my not living in reality. I assume I can work things out, no matter what. Usually I can, but not always." She made a condescending sound—agreeing. I told her it wasn't funny.

"No, nothing's funny," she said. "Especially how dumb you are." I came back with indignation.

"More often than not, in tough situations, I work it out. I get through it. Even when I'm under fire from my friends and family—I hang in."

"This isn't the same. You're being unfaithful to your wife and you're doing it for yourself. Like I told you, I don't see any good consequence for me either. Worst of all, you may regret this more than anyone! Did you see *Fargo*?" she asked. I just looked at her. "That guy, remember the guy that owned the car lot? What's his name?"

"Macy," I said. "William Macy."

"Macy, that's him. Remember how he started screwing up and dug himself into deeper and deeper shit until there was no getting out?"

10

Running the mile, after three laps, when you have nothing left, that's when you break them.

Midmorning, I opened the door to a cop car parked in front of the office. I didn't know if it had to do with us but I wasn't taking chances. I closed the door and went to the window against the back wall. Usually there wouldn't be a window on the back wall but since there was a ravine and a view... I took off the screen and helped Tara climb through. Thank god for ground-floor motels. I passed the two bags and followed. In a few minutes, we were turning north onto Route 66, heading for Peach Springs and Seligman, an eighty mile drive that would bring us back to Rt. 40, sixty-eight miles east of Kingman. I wanted to talk about Route 66 but Tara wasn't into it so I put on some music and thought about how Peach Springs must have been with Model A's rolling past, while we listened to songs and artists beginning with the letter B—"Blue Suede Shoes", "Blue Moon With Heartache", "Blue Bayou", "Bluebird Over the Mountain" (two versions), and Biggie Smalls.

"Look, Tara, we have to deal with the hand we've been dealt."

"Been dealt? You saying you got dealt the hand where you lied to your wife? How about you making things worse with Swamis? Is that a hand you were dealt?"

"No, but Alanna seeing me get in the car with you at Safeway—that's a card I was dealt."

This section of Route 66 follows the exact route where it was first laid but back then it was poured slabs of concrete. Now it's smooth asphalt, but close enough. Half an hour into the ride Tara asked me what I was thinking about?

"About the travelers on this road, overheated cars with shabby tires stopping at restaurants, like back there at Peach Springs, maybe a deck of cards on the table for the solo traveler to play soli-

taire waiting on his food or for a father to play *snap* with the kids while mom took a break.”

"Careful you don't fantasize away reality Alex. Life was hard for those people. They were poor. They lost everything in the dust bowl and the Depression because the cops worked for the rich."

"You're right." I said, pulling up beside a small cafe in Seligman.

"Aren't you going to park out back?" she asked.

"I am, starting when we leave here."

We were hungry and ordered breakfast. While we waited, I looked around. This cafe, like everything along Route 66, doubled as a curio shop. Much of the stuff is junk, massed produced in China, cheesy commemorations of the old highway, but some items are authentic, like an original Route 66 highway sign on the wall. Our waitress was young, inexperienced at waiting tables and the only one working the floor. I asked if any of the memorabilia on the walls was for sale. She said some of it was. That the stuff for sale had prices written on the back. I asked about the old highway sign? She said to take a look. I stood on a chair and took it down. She brought our breakfast and asked if there was a price on it?

"What's written on the back is 66," I said.

"That's sixty-six dollars," she said. I told her no, 66 was the highway and a Route 66 sign is valuable."

"Whatever?" she said, "I could call the judge that owns this place and ask if I can sell it to you?"

"No thanks, I was just curious." Tara gave me my first approving look of the day.

Just a few more miles of 66 and we merged back into 40 at Ash Fork. I wondered what Ash Fork had signified along the old highway but there was nothing I could see. From here it was only ten miles to Rt. 89, south to Prescott, and because they were looking for the Taurus, I put the hammer down and sang the whole of Bobby Troupe's, "Route 66". We wouldn't be getting our kicks on Route 66.

Putting the hammer down in a Ford Taurus is not the same as the 406. It felt like she might come apart at ninety miles an hour. One mile before the turnoff we passed an Arizona Highway Patrol car coming towards us. He gave us a good look and I slowed way down. It would have been easy for him to turn around but he kept on towards Kingman. I took the turn for 89 and stayed under sixty-five. Why hadn't he come back? Maybe he didn't connect us with an APB or maybe he had something else going on? Maybe chalk one-up for the good guys? I could sense Tara's unease and thought of what I might do to get her mind on something else.

"You wanna hear what we'd do on driving trips when I was a kid?"

"I guess," she said, with no particular enthusiasm.

"One time, we drove down the whole Eastern Seaboard from Niagara Falls to Florida, across the South, then across Texas and Arizona, into California. My dad would play this game with us kids. Every time we saw a Mail Pouch chewing tobacco sign on a barn, and there were many, whoever saw it first got a dime. A dime wasn't the same as now—they added up. And because Mail Pouch was big business, with their advertising mainly on barns, it paid off for my dad with us kids passing hour after hour without fighting or bickering. Instead we were searching ."

"That was smart," she said.

"Yeah it was, and that's a trip with good memories. We were moving to Southern California. It was 1956. Elvis was on the radio and everybody wanted to be in California. Most Americans were some kind of middle class but that didn't make you well off. We'd get a motel, mostly they were called auto courts—stand-alone cabins. At night, maybe somewhere in Georgia or Alabama, folks would sit out and visit, telling stories. My dad told about riding the rails from Montreal to Florida during the Depression. How one night he nearly froze, except for covering himself with parchment paper, which was the cargo. Another night it was hay bales they broke open and snuggled into for warmth.

There was this one old guy at this auto court in Florida. Each time my dad said something outside the guy's experience, he'd say,

'Whew, man that rough!' He said it over and over. I think my brother and I made five hundred miles, then five more years, saying it to each other."

"I'm not feeling good about things Alex." I didn't say anything.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"I heard you, Tara."

"You can't decide anymore what we do Alex! Those stories about leaving motorcycle people gives me questions about your judgment!"

This was reminding me of being home. You want to get an assessment of a guy—ask his wife. Now Tara was full of doubts about me. Was I wrong to be involved with Tara? It'd been a long time since there'd been passion in my life. Should that part of me die? I read something in the *Times* about a Catholic nun, Sister Margaret Farley, who wrote a book about human sexuality. The book's been out a few years but recently the Vatican went after her, which made the book climb the best seller list. Her thesis: when the sexual needs in a relationship aren't being met, the obligation for sexual fidelity is released. Tara asked me what I was thinking about? I put it into one long sentence.

"I'm talking about the people you left on the road," she said, "which somehow takes your imagination to sex and infidelity? Anyway, you needed to tell your wife before you acted on it."

"Talking about the idea of sexual fidelity is one thing Tara, but talking about the specifics of *who and where* does nothing but harm."

"You make it sound hopeless!" she said.

"Maybe it is hopeless. If we're here to procreate and multiply and the rest hasn't been worked out, we do the best we can."

"Then why can't you be like other men? Get the massage with a happy ending?"

"Because that would make me a loser, Tara. What's happening with you and me is because I have real feelings for you, and I have a wife, who I care about. Those are my circumstances. Because I want a way to work it out makes me neither a bad person—nor

delusional. Unless you think the occasional hand job, from a third-world woman, will make the world go away?"

"Why do you say third-world? You're racist!"

"No, it's a fact! My closest friend owns a building he rents to a foot-massage storefront, but when you go on-line and check out the comments, the girls giving *happy endings* are Asian. Most don't speak English. We were in there a couple of months back and the manager didn't recognize him. She apologized because she had no Asian girls. The only girl working was Mexican."

"What were you doing in there? Did you get one?"

"One? The last time I got one, I was in Sicily, in the navy. I was nineteen."

"Tell me about the Navy."

"Okay, I was nineteen, stationed at a NATO air base near Catania, Sicily. The Navy was all volunteer, most sailors were uneducated, many were from the South, euphemistically *getting their first pair of shoes*. I was into reading, playing the guitar, running on the golf course at night and using the weight room. I'd be up in my rack (what we called our bunks), with *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, while Archie Rogers and Bob Raston would be organizing an excursion to *The Gut*, which was four square blocks of ill-repute. Of course I'd go. There was this one little place called Mama Suzy's where you could get a beer and a girl. I'd go for the beer and the talk. On the base, there were maybe a half-dozen intellectual guys that I hung out with. To go to town, we could either take a taxi or there was this huge, hand-me-down, Bluebird bus from the air force, which made one run into town and one run back each night with maybe forty of us on board. First stop was *The Gut* where most everybody got off, then one more stop where Sam, Ed, and I usually got off—the Excelsior Hotel. From there we could go to dinner, take in a movie, or meet Italians for a drink. I think it's still true, figuratively speaking, that most men get off at *The Gut*. Maybe it's the world that's delusional."

"And you have a healthy outlook?" she asked.

"No, I'm as fucked up as the rest, but moved along by what's immanent and real."

"Maybe the thing about love and sex and how badly you're screwing it up is a paradox?" she said. "Maybe your motives come from a better place than someone with a hand-job mentality, but you're screwed up Alex. Those stories about leaving people out on the road aren't the stories of a normal person. People who find themselves in the same unworkable situations, time after time, have problems. And I get doubts when I hear you trying to explain how the crazy shit you do fits into some larger, rational whole."

"I need a break from this inquisition," I said, scrolling through my songs for Marshall Crenshaw, "Cynical Girl", (who has no use for the real world), some John Prine, The Pretenders, "Back on the Chain Gang"—which was appropriate.

"Tell me about the guy from the campground?"

"You mean Andy?"

"I mean Andy," she said.

"Andy was one of six of us riding across Asia. I took on the responsibility for: finding, buying, equipping, and shipping the bikes for four of us."

"Sounds like work."

"More than you know. It took months!"

"One question Alex, out of the six, how many did you end up riding across Russia with?" I didn't answer and she remained serious.

"Let me guess. One?"

"Close"

"Two?"

"How about none? Does none work for you? I met Andy at the airport, at Inchon. He said his catatonic hello, sitting on his gear. He wouldn't stay at the hostel where Cisco was staying, though it was better than our hotel and closer to where we needed to be. He said, 'no hostels—don't do hostels!' On the ferry to Siberia he hung with the three Americans, while the Chileans and I, and two

Mexicans we met, Canelo and Manny, shared common space with the Koreans."

"Maybe he was more comfortable with the Americans?"

"Probably, but when the four of them would come to the Korean area, they wouldn't take off their shoes—a sign of disrespect. Then in Siberia, on day one, it all fell apart. It took hours to go fifty miles. Cisco was impatient to get to Vladivostok, where he had an arrangement to meet up with Katya, who he'd been chatting up on-line, and I had no idea. He said he'd wait for me at the city limits. The four gringos wanted to go to a restaurant, which they did and the Mexicans wanted to go after Cisco. I had to choose."

"Did you go to the restaurant and tell them you were leaving?"

"No, there wasn't time. The Mexicans were leaving and I had to decide!"

"So you left the four goofs in Siberia?" she asked, smiling.

"It's not like that Tara! I told them I don't sit down and eat until I cover the first 200 miles of the day. I wrote it online. I said it in person. And here we were at fifty miles. I didn't see them again for two weeks and I didn't ride with three of them after day one. When they left the restaurant, Andy ran into the back of one of them, ripped panniers off both bikes and broke his foot. That was day one. After we found Andy again, Cisco decided to spend two nights instead of one in a dorm but Andy wanted to keep going. Cisco yelled, 'Andy, I'm not your fucking father! You don't have to stay here!' Another morning Andy was pacing a campground parking lot with his broken foot, mumbling about getting going, Cisco again yelled, this time from his tent, 'Andy, Alex and I are lazy. We like to sleep late but if we have to ride 750 miles we can do it—and you can't!'

Soon after that, Andy got lost in a rainstorm and I thought we were done with him but somehow he reappeared, heading in the wrong direction on a secondary road, not anywhere we planned to be. He was constantly behind because he insisted on fifty-five while we rode seventy. One day, we headed into a city, Tomsk, riding through a series of traffic lights. Cisco was maybe eight cars ahead of me, waiting for the left turn signal, when Andy pulled up

beside me—livid: 'So you've brought me to another fucking city,' he snarled. I went between the lanes to catch up with Cisco, just making the green arrow, left. I passed Cisco, made a right down a side street and pulled over. He raised his visor, giving me a questioning raise of his chin. 'I'm hoping he doesn't find us,' I said."

"Where was he?"

"I don't know. I never saw him again. I heard about him through his wife. She called Carla, saying his bike wouldn't start and could I go help him? He was 2000 miles back and I wasn't going."

"He needed you and you just left him along the road in Russia, Alex?"

"I'm not buying that. He didn't need me—you need me! He needed to go home. The bike was new and he had a laptop with an internet full of geeks waiting to help a guy fix a bike that wouldn't start! He was in Russia because I was in Russia and he didn't belong there! He should have stayed home! He didn't want to fix the fucking bike: a bike that could have gone around the world and back! He couldn't handle being there alone so he gave away a brand new bike and flew home. Just like Hans in Mexico, there was no chance of either of them getting where they wanted to go unless they followed in my wake. They couldn't even do that, so fuck em both."

"To leave him was pathetic!" she said.

"I don't think so. I hook up with these guys because I think I need someone to ride with and they turn out to be dipshits. Not all of them. Canelo's no dipshit! Cisco's no dipshit. But I can tell you ten that are! We get a good laugh because it's pathetic. Yeah, I'm pathetic for thinking I can make six guys I don't know get along crossing Russia. I've always been pathetic, as far back as I can remember: trying to convince my drunken father to quit beating my mom. Always compromising, appeasing, to stop him from pushing us kids, with our suitcases, into a Canadian, winter night. I'm pathetic for thinking I could deal with my mother, who, when I was eleven, told me she'd been sexually abused by her father. I'm pathetic for thinking I could count on her to not rat me out to my father day after day, which she kept doing, knowing all the while he

would beat me. The only thing more pathetic than leaving those guys in Russia would have been to stay. Each time I left there was nothing more to talk about."

"So when you tell me you'll leave me, you mean it?"

"It's not at all the same. To leave you would be something I'd regret."

"So I don't have to worry about you leaving?"

"Yeah, you do."

Nearing Prescott Tara began to ask something but I raised a hand to stop her. For a couple of miles I'd been aware of a black Suburban far behind us, closing the distance at high speed. It was easy to watch their progress through the scarcity of bushes and trees in the high desert. "We have company," I said, in the most matter of fact way I could muster. Tara jerked around to see what I was talking about. They would be on us in a minute or two, which left little time to act. She started to say something as we entered Prescott but I waved her off—needing her under control. "Scroll my phone and play 'Hot Rod Lincoln'," I said, which she did, and soon Charlie Ryan was coming through the speakers—hot-rodding up the Grapevine Hill—that great guitar riff between the verses. We'd been planning to go 69 East but I opted for 89 South. I knew these roads. This time I didn't slow much through town, keeping a close look for cops. I could see the Chevy back there in traffic and I wanted them to see which way we went. I was going to take them through a long downhill, a maze of curves, find somewhere to hide off the road until they passed, then head back. It may be a Taurus, but it weighs a bunch, and it can go downhill fast. No good in the turns, but that merely required finesse. A simple finesse of pedal to the metal with my body like a praying mantis over the steering wheel, using everything I'd learned from motorcycles, bicycles, and cars, to keep her on the road. I couldn't let them overtake me before we went through a mile or so of turns and found somewhere to get off.

Turns bending left are safer and faster—if you lose control, you go off the road. Turns to the right are more tricky because losing

control puts you into the oncoming lane. I did controlled drifts in the turns to the left and slightly less of a drift turning to the right. Tara held up well except for one brief outburst. "Hot Rod Lincoln" ended and John Mellencamp went into "Hurts So Good".

I took some comfort knowing the Suburban would be no BMW through these turns either, though I feared it might fare better than our FoMoCo. After maybe three minutes, with no sight of them, we came on a dirt road to the right, and I took—fast. It was a single lane and I didn't bother to turn the car around because there was no way out if they blocked us. We sat there a few minutes and listened with the windows down. Eight or ten cars passed behind us, maybe three coming down from Prescott. The Chevy had to have passed by now so I backed out into the highway to head back up towards Prescott just as the Suburban came around a blind curve almost taking us side-on. They had too much speed to stop and with guard-rails on both sides of the road ahead, they kept on.

"What now?" asked Tara.

"Not good, not good. How could they have taken so long to catch us?"

"Maybe it had to do with how crazy you were driving?"

"I don't think so. That might account for thirty or forty seconds but not three or four minutes." I was rattled. The Suburban had double or triple the horsepower of the Taurus. There was no way they wouldn't catch us on the uphill back to Prescott!

"Don't worry," I said. "I can handle this."

I floored it, remembering back to a time in Baja in my little Honda HX, lean-burn, five speed coupe, heading to Cabo. My first night in Mexico I stayed at a motel, maybe 200 miles from the border. I awakened the next morning, and I was sick. Not just sick but with the flu of flus. It was so bad I had to stop every thirty or forty miles north, to sleep along the road, waking up drenched in sweat. When I got to Ensenada I took the road to Tecate, not wanting to deal with Tijuana. I planned on a good nap at the military checkpoint, half way to the border, where I'd be safe. When I got there it was abandoned. I stopped anyway, beside an orchard, made sure the

doors were locked and dozed off. I couldn't have been out long when I looked up and saw an older Ford LTD, black and white, cruise past heading south. They went on, maybe a hundred yards, turned around and passed by again slowly, checking me out. Two guys, mustaches and shades. This time they went past about fifty yards and started another u-turn, which was enough for me. I took off past them, winding through my gears, thinking about that big Ford Interceptor V8 and my small four cylinder. All they had to do, in thirty miles, was turn around and catch me. What I had going for me was a mountain road, full of tight turns. I was the one with no weight, a low center of gravity and Honda rack and pinion steering. What I lacked was power.

In the straights they easily overtook me. Soon, they came up alongside, with the passenger flashing a badge. This wasn't the first time I'd had to decide if robbers were cops and I couldn't go for these guys being cops. If they were cops, they were off-duty and they meant me harm. A truck coming towards us made them drop back in behind. Now we were in the turns and I could hold them off, which I did, until maybe five miles from Tecate where the road leveled and straightened. They came back alongside. This time the passenger pointed a gun at me, with his window down, angrily motioning for me to pull over. I was scared. I thought he might shoot me, when a southbound pickup truck made them fall back again. I powered over the last hill in third gear and headed down into Tecate with the LTD right on me. Towards the bottom of the hill, I saw a Federale, his roof lights ablaze, behind someone he'd pulled over. I floored it, skidding to a stop twenty feet behind him, making him jump to the side as the LTD sped on past. The Federale cautiously approached me, his hand on his gun. I rolled down my window. "Lo siento señor." (I'm sorry, sir) "Estoy muy enfermo. Cuidate por favor." (I'm very sick. Please be careful.) "Donde es la frontera?" (Which way is the border?)

My daydream was broken by the Suburban in the rear view mirror, gaining on me through the turns. He swung for the oncoming lane then quickly hit the brakes, tucking back in to avoid a fast-moving

truck coming down from Prescott. Again he went for the passing lane and came up beside me. This time the passenger had his window down, motioning me to pull over. I made like I didn't understand what he wanted. He flashed something from his wallet. I stayed focused on the road, not wanting to knowingly evade the Feds, when an eighteen wheeler materialized in the curve ahead and the Chevy barely made it back into our lane. Now I was on a big uphill, in a gutless Taurus that slowed to below forty-five. I pulled it down into low to maintain some speed, completely wound out, in a twisting section of road with guardrails on both sides, with double, solid, no passing lines. Again, he came alongside. Even floored we were slowing. Tara yelled, "He has a gun!" I looked at him, giving my best horrified look, nodding my head, indicating I would pull over as soon I could. This was more desperate than the time in Mexico. I kept my eyes on his, yelling incoherencies to the driver, again and again, to gain his attention. By the time they saw what I had seen two curves back, it was too late.

About eighty percent of all eighteen wheeler cabs are white, but this one was red, not red and white, but red—the color of danger! It came into our curve on the downhill from Prescott, the big rig having gotten up to speed. I caught a look of sick fear from the guy closest to me. Time slowed down, like in a fight, when you see a big hook coming, long in arriving, but you can't get out of the way. The driver accelerated to pass me, realized the math didn't work, and hit his brakes to get back into our lane. And I did the same. The big rig hit them head on, going about 55, with the Chevy slowed to maybe 45. Where I come from that's a 100 mile an hour collision. Outside our doors the din was otherworldly. The force of the blow jack-knifed the truck, and, as we slipped past the trailer, the cab took out just enough guard rail to push the Suburban into a two hundred foot roll down the side of a mountain.

Tara looked at me stricken. "Go back!" I didn't respond. "Turn around and go back!" she demanded. When I found a place I turned around and headed back.

"You hit the brakes so they had nowhere to go!" she accused. "You killed them!" she shrieked.

"I did what I had to do Tara. I saw the gun. I saw the truck before they did and I'm hoping Swamis is in the back seat."

"It's murder!"

"Only in their world. I'm the one with a gun in his face. I told you, I'm meeting whatever they bring."

"This changes everything," she grimaced.

"This changes nothing!" I said.

"You hit the brakes on purpose!"

"I wasn't chasing them on a winding mountain road. I wasn't in the wrong lane. I wasn't pointing a gun at them!"

"But you hit the brakes so they couldn't get out of the way!" she sobbed, as we turned into a curve and came onto the scene. I slowed to a crawl as we passed. No cars had come from the direction of Prescott and only one had come from the south. A black Miata, with the top down, had pulled up in front of the truck and stopped alongside the missing section of guardrail. A man and woman were out of the car looking down the mountainside. The woman was saying something to the trucker, who looked at us without recognition. The front end of the truck was destroyed. The driver's door had sprung open making visible the Spanish script. The truck was Mexican. Tara was looking at me but I didn't stop. Instead, I picked up speed and headed south. I wasn't going to New Orleans.

I didn't turn back towards Prescott and Tara didn't ask me why. So much for wanting an equal say in our plans. We wound down through the curves towards the flats, which would soon take us into California, as afternoon shadows began to lengthen and the sun pushed behind distant mountains. I got caught up in the vistas, each curve bringing us closer to the basin below. I saw the sign for Bagdad and thought back to a time long ago. Except for the sound of the tires in the curves and an occasional oncoming car, all was an eerie calm, reminding me of the master swordsman in *Seven Samurai*, waiting, sitting behind the base of a tree, before killing two brigands. For the few seconds it took them to reach him, he picked a couple of tiny flowers, twirling them between his fingers.

"What are you thinking about?" asked Tara. I didn't bring up the twirling flowers.

"Thinking about that cutoff back there, remembering a time I made a special trip to Bagdad."

"How can you be thinking about a trip after what just happened? Goddamn it Alex! We killed people back there and you're thinking about a trip you made?"

"Working ourselves over won't change anything. There's no easy answers for us. We either put ourselves at their mercy. Or we fight. You decide Tara. Are we defending ourselves or are we murderers? You can't have it both ways. If you think I'm a murderer, I'm gone!"

"So if I want to talk about you killing people, you're leaving?"

"You got it. All I control here is my presence and my absence."
"What the fuck does that mean?" she demanded.

"It means I have no personal control over what happens with you and me and if we don't see it the same, I leave. It means I don't want to be here if you think I'm a murderer."

"I don't think you're a murderer, Alex, but we could have pulled over to see what they wanted?"

"Tara, are you nuts? Pull over to see what they wanted?"

"This is insane. And you're part of the insanity," she said.

"Do you think if we'd pulled over, things would be better? Isn't it better if Swamis is in the car? If not, he'll find a way to get rid of me. That's either prison or dead, and he'll pick dead. Where does that leave you? Are you thinking this will go away? We're fighting for our lives. Our hope is for Swamis to be at the bottom of a canyon. That sign for Bagdad is more than coincidence. When W. Bush, with Rumsfeld, Cheney, and the rest of the asshole posse, decided to invade Iraq, with the support of the supposed good guys, Hillary, Kerry, and Colin Powell, I made my own decision. I got on a motorcycle and rode to my Bagdad because I wanted to get there before Bush. My Bagdad had a different spelling and was on a different continent, but it was the best I could do! I was doing something. They were wrecking my country. My country, not theirs! They don't deserve it. No matter what you say about me

Tara, I don't want any of this to be happening. I wish we could be back at Safeway and I don't get in the car.”

For a few minutes there was blessed silence.

"What are you thinking now Alex?"

"Get out of the country,"

"And go where?"

“Ironically, the safer place to go is south.”

“Where are you thinking?”

"Mexico first, then maybe South America."

"Mexico is dangerous, especially by car?" she asked.

"You think Mexico's more dangerous than this?"

"Are you thinking we take the car?" she asked.

"I'm not sure. Maybe, but I don't want to be on this side of the border for long."

The twisting mountain road was now mostly behind us when we took the 71 cutoff for 60, and Salome. I knew there was nothing there, except another cutoff to another Tonopah, which would take us to Gila Bend and south to Mexico.

"What about your wife and family?"

"I know—I know! To have any chance of figuring this out, we need to get away from situations that send us to prison, or kill us. If we can get some time without being harassed maybe we can come up with a plan.”

"I don't see how time will help," she said.

“Time's our only possibility. Even I know we can't take the Feds on.”

"And your wife?"

"Same thing. It's better for my family for me to keep moving. I don't have many possibilities. But going home isn't one of them."

It was about nine when we reached Tonopah and headed south along a back road paralleling AZ 85 to Gila Bend. I think we saw two cars in sixty miles before coming into town just after ten. I had the volume turned up for Eric Burdon and the Animals: “When I Was Young”, “Don't Bring Me Down”, “Please Don't Let Me Be

Misunderstood”, “I’ll Do What I Want” and “We Gotta Get Out of the Place”

Tara asked, “Did you pick these songs on purpose?”

“Nah, most of the songs I like are about love, trouble, or both.”

We stopped at the first motel that looked acceptable. The Yucca was clean, with parking behind the pool, where the Taurus would be out of sight. Tara didn't want to come to the office, so I got a room, filling in the license number with one incorrect digit, the one digit most easily mistaken. I listed the car as a Ford, but not the model. I had to give my ID. There was no way around it, but hopefully for the last time? When I came out, Tara was leaning against the front passenger door.

"I feel like walking," she said, "and I'm hungry." We put the bags inside the room; she commented on the one bed:

“Did you ask for one bed?”

"I did.”

I went to the office to ask how far it was to McDonald's? A mile and a half. The restaurant lobby was open until eleven, which gave us fifty minutes. We walked a good pace, making a plan.

"I'm thinking Baja," I said, "but I have concerns, because without a vehicle permit and tourist cards, we can't cross to the mainland from the peninsula."

"We could just stay in Baja?" she said.

"If they find us down there it's not good. There's only one road out."

“Could we leave the car and get to the mainland?” she asked.

“No, without a vehicle you have to have tourist cards. Border cities are the only places to get them."

“So, let's get them."

"We can't take the chance. Remember when we were checking for an APB and I found out there was also an APW, an All Ports Warning? An APW notifies all border stations from which you can leave the country. All the entry points to Mexico. And the relationship between Mexico and the United States isn't in our favor. Weapons are moving constantly across our border south. Most ve-

hicles don't get stopped entering Mexico—just waved through. It's always been that way but now, heading north, it's different. From the Guatemalan border to the U.S., Mexican troops stop and search everyone, every few hundred miles. Trucks are backed up 500 deep, being searched by soldiers outfitted with Humvees and Desert Storm uniforms. Going into Baja without visitor permits lowers our options”

"But once we're out of the country, what can our government do to us?" she asked.

"What Homeland Security can do to us doesn't stop at the border. It's about power, not about our rights. Mexico's coming apart from drug wars. Drug wars caused by our *war on drugs*."

"Hasn't this been going on longer than I've been alive?" she asked."

"Not quite. When my youngest was five, Lee and I took him to Tijuana—at night. That was a dozen years ago. It wasn't as bad then and if you go back to when I was young, Mexico was safe. When I was twelve and my brother was ten, my parents would drop us off in downtown Tijuana, meeting up with us, hours later, at the Jai Alai Palace. Just a couple of kids exploring a foreign city. We knew the Mexican barrios as well as the tourist district."

"Why don't the Mexicans legalize drugs and end the problem?" she asked.

"It may be too late. The cartels are a huge, militarized version of the Mafia, into things other than drugs, like kidnapping, human trafficking, and stealing oil. I read where the PRI, the ruling party in Mexico for fifty years, until this last decade, has just reclaimed the Presidency and wants to make a deal with the cartels. They stop the killings, the kidnappings, and the torture, for a truce on the drug war."

"That's the same as legalizing drugs?" she said.

"It is, but our government's coming unhinged at the prospect and fighting back. One of the big cartels has been laundering money through horses and racing in the United States. Now we're confiscating their money. In retaliation, the cartels are going after American tourists."

"Then why the fuck are we going to Mexico?"

"Maybe we're just going through Mexico. We can't leave this country without sneaking out and Mexico's our best bet."

At MacDonald's, we ordered with ten minutes to spare and ate at a table outside.

Walking back to The Yucca, traffic thinned, making for less civilians and more cops. Several passed but I didn't care.

"This whole thing's taken on an unreality," she said. "The life I know is gone, traded for whatever this is? It makes me wonder what's reality and what's not?"

"You're lucky," I said "Most people never get the chance to ask that question."

"You call that lucky?"

"Yeah. Most people are born into a way of life. They accept the status quo—along with the local religious superstitions. If you're a Christian here, most likely you'd be a Hindu there. They trade the mystery for some comfort."

"You think the mystery is better?"

"Way better but not necessarily more comforting. You say your whole life's changed, but has it? Day to day it's changed but you still have no idea what all this is? You didn't know yesterday and you don't know today. Some things have changed for us but not the big things. Makes me think of the first written joke."

"What's that?"

"It's pre Hindu. The Vedas. Rig Veda. Something like: 'The gods came into being after this creation, so who knows for sure, whether he has created it, or not? He who surveys it from the highest heaven, only he knows for sure, or perhaps he does not?' The best description of the mystery I know."

"Cute," she said. But not much to lean on."

"Maybe we can take shelter in another quote: 'When Vishnu wakes up, the dream is over'."

"I don't know what that means but I don't want to think about it," she said.

We made love with no talk about the ethics of it. We were too close to the edge. Falling asleep, she said, with a bit of mischievousness, she hoped I'd taken precautions to avoid getting myself pregnant. She drifted off mumbling something about *what the hell was a Jai Alai Palace?*

When she was asleep, I dressed and went to the motel office. On the guest computer I emailed my wife, using an address from a decade ago. I sent the email to my friend Rush, asking him to forward it tomorrow afternoon. Assuming everything was monitored, I took no chances. No direct emails, no phone calls. My phone and Tara's were on airplane mode—turned off. That didn't make them secure. I thought about getting rid of them altogether, but before deciding, I had to check if they could be tracked. I looked up ATM's for Gila Bend, another way they could track our whereabouts. But I needed money, as much as I could get. Better than ATM's was the cash advance on my BMW card. I looked up my limit. I could access \$7500 but I had to wait until morning to call. They'd start charging interest right away, but Carla could pay it off the same day.

11

Since I was a kid, Mexico, the Baja peninsula in particular, has been my second home. Now that seems a cruel joke?

In the morning I was back at the motel office where I made arrangements to get a \$7500 cash advance. Then I checked the news from Prescott for a story about the accident. There was nothing. I tried different searches to get information. Again nothing. Then I remembered something Rush told me. If you can't find what you're looking for, type in a question with as many key words as you can think of. I came across an Arizona blog asking my ques-

tion about the accident but with more information than I had. There had been a news item late yesterday, describing a black Suburban attempting to pass an unknown vehicle, meeting an eighteen wheeler head-on and crashing through a guardrail, killing both occupants who had previously been contractors in Iraq. The story had since been pulled and there was no follow up. The blog asked if anyone knew why? I knew why but I wasn't saying. I felt safer with the Taurus described as an unknown vehicle, and better yet, the men in the car had been contractors. Sanctioned to carry out criminal activities by the Feds—but not Feds.

Then I did a search on cell phone tracking, the posts were all over the map. Some said a cellphone, turned off, was not trackable. Others said they were always trackable. The one I liked the best said a cell phone without a SIM card was not trackable. Tara and I each had the 5S with a removable SIM card. Then, I read about guns and Mexico. Carrying a firearm is a felony with the possibility of a long prison sentence. I found a surprising paragraph, which put a smile on my face. "Interestingly, a 2002 Washington Post article points out that attempting a prison escape in Mexico will not earn you any additional criminal charges so long as you don't hurt anyone or break any additional laws in your breakout. The law says that all inmates have the right to seek their freedom, said Julio Caesar Lara, 27, who served three years in jail but not a day more for his temporary escape from a Mexican jail cell. "The opportunity presented itself, and I took it".

While Tara was still in the bathroom, I watched an HBO documentary about Jerry Weintraub—*His Way*. In his early twenties, Jerry had this idea to take Elvis on tour so he called Colonel Tom Parker to arrange it. Parker, Elvis's manager, said he didn't know Jerry. Elvis was not going on tour. And he hung-up. When Tara came out of the bathroom, I told her what she'd missed. Jerry went on to call Parker every morning for a year, and they became phone buddies. One morning Parker called Jerry. If he wanted to take Elvis on tour, he needed to show up with a million dollar cashier's check. Jerry had no money but that didn't stop him. He knew a rich Elvis

fan who put up the money for half of Jerry's concert business. Colonel Parker had half, which left Jerry with twenty-five percent of the concert business. The tour was successful and Jerry became a multimillionaire. One morning, after the tour, the Colonel showed up with a large duffel at Jerry's office where he dumped a huge pile of concessions and memorabilia money on the desk. Jerry thought his share was from ticket sales only but when you were partners with the Colonel you got half of everything. The Colonel karate-chopped the pile into two portions, saying, "That's your half."

The biography's called *My Way* because Jerry went next to Frank Sinatra with an offer to play Madison Square Garden. Frank said he'd already done that, but Jerry was quick on his feet. He proposed they broadcast from a boxing ring with Howard Cosell announcing and beam it worldwide. Frank came out of retirement.

Except for one thing, I wouldn't be telling this. Jerry's chutzpah extended to women, including his wife. When she caught him in their bed with another woman, she fined him one million dollars. Later, when he fell in love with Suzy, his wife didn't want a divorce. Instead, she and Suzy became friends and shared the kitchen. Making things more interesting, the interview included Jerry's best buddies, George HW Bush and Barbara, who didn't want a Suzy in their relationship (at least Barbara said she didn't), but none of this had changed how they felt about Jerry.

I didn't say anything when the bio ended because my path was clear. All I had to do was kill Swamis and get Carla to appreciate Tara. I thought of Napoleon Dynamite's brother Kip. "Easy!"

We didn't look for a restaurant in Gila Bend, instead we went to a super market where we bought all those nut butter, kipper snacks, and whole wheat cracker items, plus a dozen, two gallon containers of Arrowhead water. From there we went to a UPS store for three large corrugated boxes into which went all the motorcycle gear and everything else unnecessary for a road trip, all mailed back to Ashland. The guitar we considered a necessity. Our last stop was to get

the cash advance on my Visa card. The bank wouldn't do \$7500 because of a \$5000 limit. That would have to do.

Leaving town we headed south on AZ 85, sixty miles to Ajo, which is garlic in Spanish, and boiling hot this time of year. I'd been there once, a long time ago. Tara was hungry and I remembered there being a place to eat. I wanted an American meal before we crossed into Mexico.

"You mean we're crossing the border today?" she asked.

"Yeah, is that all right with you?"

"I guess it is. Just makes things a bit more weird. Why didn't Bonnie and Clyde leave the country?"

"They probably didn't think of it. One bank after another, bound to get caught. More likely to get killed. They probably didn't have much of a plan."

"Why do I keep feeling we're them?" she asked.

We drove through mid-morning heat, with Doug Sahn, Freddie Fender, Augie Myers, and Flacco Jimenez working their Tex-Mex magic, before we came onto a minuscule truck stop and cafe with a graveled parking lot and no trucks, one car, and us. Inside, the same guy was the waiter and the cook. While Tara went to freshen up, I ordered breakfast for us. The sign said, *Breakfast Anytime*. When she came back I was writing on our map of the Southwest. I finished as breakfast arrived and passed it to her:

way out west

driving through hot desert

tuning up and down

the radio

for something

to listen to

3 stations are spanish

another selling sin and guilt

and of course

the inevitable talk from the right

where capitalism
protects no one
not the workers
not the poor
not the old
not the sick
just capitalism
or socialism
you choose

at a small
truck stop
the guy in the camo hat
is the waiter
and the cook
breakfast
\$4.95
2 eggs
hash browns
sausage and toast
how much without the meat
he pauses
to make a price
no one here
gets breakfast
without the meat

Elvis used to say, that to be happy, you needed three things, someone to love, something to do, and something to look forward to. The love part was easy—at least two women might end up hating me. As for something to look forward to, I thought again of Napoleon Dynamite’s brother Kip, “Nothing comes to mind right now.”

85 takes you south through the town of Why. I said something about how all questions are *what* questions. Who—what’s her name? Where—at what place? When—at what time? Why—for

what reason? That was our question. For what reason are we doing what we're doing? A few miles south we passed through the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument.

"Can we stop?" asked Tara.

I pulled over and we walked out to a huge pipe cactus.

"I haven't seen one of these," she said. "It's amazing. Reminds me of an organ with pipes coming out of the top." I told her this national park was called Pipe Cactus. Maybe for that reason.

"These cacti are distinct from those big barrel cactuses in cowboy movies," I said. "It's as if those big ones need to live where there's enough rainfall to fill them up and store it. Here, where there's so little moisture, each pipe could be a mini-storage."

"Those big *cowboy movie* cactus are called Saguaro," she said. "How do you know that?"

"How do you know all the shit you know?"

Beneath a thirty foot cactus, I said, "I love you, Tara."

"Like a sister, like a roadster, like a motorcycle?" she asked.

"Yeah, like all of those, but more."

"Then you're going to be with me from now on?"

"I don't know what to do."

"You shoulda kept your pants on cowboy, and you don't know why these cacti evolve the way they do. Like when you told me about the *Bristlecones*. Some of it sounded right but what do you really know about something that's been alive thousands of years? Then again," she surmised, "you might know, being closer to their age."

"What about what I said Tara?"

"You want to know what I really think Alex? I think you might be a fool."

"Do you love me, Tara?"

"I hope not." she said.

After exchanging \$800 into pesos, we crossed the border at Lukeville into Sonoyta. I was wary of U.S. Immigration but they paid little attention to us. Mexican Customs waved us through with hardly a look.

"We made it girl. We just traded the U.S. Government, for even more corrupt police and drug cartels. Nothing to be concerned about. They share equal disdain for justice and the little guy."

On the south side of the border our spirits shot up. I hadn't decided if we were heading south or west from here but there was something in Sonoyta I wanted to see and it didn't take long to find—an automobile graveyard on the south side of the highway. We got out and walked down one side of a chain link fence. Towards the back, with weeds growing out her side windows, was a four-door, 53 Plymouth. I was happy to see her again.

"This should be good," said Tara.

"When I was twenty-two or so," I began, "I left Southern California with my friend Ed from the Navy, and a rock drummer, Jerry, from Miami, Oklahoma. This is as far as the Plymouth made it before the transmission shifter gave out. From here the three of us hitchhiked to Mexico City. Some days we didn't make twenty miles. Coming back up to Brownsville, Texas, we were so dirty a peasant woman gave us some pesos. In Waco we decided to split up because drivers wouldn't stop for three guys. Ed went on alone. Later we got a ride from a guy going to Phoenix in a Impala, who wanted to sleep. Just over the Arizona border, I saw Ed hitching in the blazing haze of the day. We picked him up with the owner asleep on the back seat and three of us in the front.

"Did you leave the car here, or, since I know something about you, did you just leave it on the road?"

"You got it. We left it along the road after throwing our pillows into a tree."

"So much for saving the planet."

"The planet didn't need saving back then. Anyway, two guys picked us up. I played the guitar from the back seat. One of them said I was the only person who sounded worse, accompanied by guitar."

"That reminds me," she said, "All this time and I haven't heard you play!"

"Too busy with felonies," I said.

Back in the car, we headed west towards Tijuana.

"You didn't tell me how you knew the car was there?"

"I saw it once. I think I was in a bus passing through town, or maybe I was hitching in a big rig? There weren't as many wrecks back then and I caught a glimpse. It hasn't moved in all these years."

The road west stretched out into a bleak, desert horizon, empty, except for a run-down police car and a local cop waving us over with a white baton.

"Shit! We didn't ditch the gun."

"Where is it?"

"Under your seat but we can deal with this guy." I one-handed a twenty off my roll into the another pocket while pulling to a stop. I suggested we get out and stretch.

"Give him your best smile babe!"

"Buenas Tardes, Señor."

"Buenas Tardes," he replied.

"Que paso, Señor?"

"Papales," he answered. I smiled to Tara.

"He wants our papers. Come around so I can introduce my daughter."

"Señor, Le presento mi hija."

"Como se llama?" he asked.

"He wants to know your name."

"Tara," she said slowly and held out her hand.

"Ask his name."

"Ella pregunta Señor, como se llama?" He smiled reluctantly. Our friendliness was undermining his formality.

"Alex, me llamo Alex." Tara beamed!

"Alex, mi padre, Alex," she said, pointing to me. Now he couldn't help it as I stuck out my hand and we shook, Alex to Alex. Then he got down to business.

"Ahora hay muchas problemas en el Norte de Mexico. Hay muchas personas de los Usados Unidos que vienen aqui a vender armas. Tiene armas, Señor?"

"He's asking if we have arms?" Tara shook her head and smiled.

"Tell him we're liberals and mom wouldn't even let you have a 22 to shoot varmints." I translated as best I could but he was adamant.

"Tell him we were searched at U.S. and Mexican customs, fifteen minutes ago." she said. "Ask him if tourists get searched every half-hour in Mexico?" I translated and he made a show of contrition while maintaining his duty to check out the car. Good-naturedly, I asked if he knew that Mexican trucks were exempt from highway checks in the U.S. He demurred before letting us know that police here have to buy their own guns, uniforms, and sometimes the tires for their cars. Writing tickets for violations paid his salary. I translated for Tara.

"Ask him if we can make a small contribution," she asked. He acted affronted and talked rapidly at me. The only word I got out of his barrage was *mordida*, what the local cops and functionaries live on: bites, or kickbacks. I took my time, remembering to smile and breathe deep, as I explained it to Tara.

"No, no," she shook her head. "No bribe, I sympathize with an officer of the law having to buy his own equipment. Ask him if he has kids? Explain to him, I was talking about a small contribution, never a bribe."

"You explain it. I'll help you." I told her the words, and she repeated them with emphasis.

"Señor, nunca una mordida. Solamente algo para sus necesidades. Nada mas!"

"Cuanto?" he asked me.

"Diez dollars."

"Es poco," he said. He had me follow him to look at his rear tires. "Si, es poco, pero no somos ricos." I raised the bid to twenty and he reluctantly nodded agreement. I gave him the twenty and we headed towards Tijuana.

"I think I got what you said to him. Is that right? 200 miles to San Luis?" she exclaimed, as we passed a kilometer marker.

"This is Mexico. That's kilometers—120 miles."

"No towns in between?" she asked.

"On either side of the border. This is hot and desolate country." "Just us and a few black Mercedes full of drug runners looking for a bit of fun," she said. "But we have your pop-gun and all they have a trunk full of surface-to-air missiles."

"No big deal," I said. "I'll shoot them before they get the trunk open."

"How smart was it to forget about the gun?" she asked. I made a sound of exasperation.

"Yeah, makes me think I can't depend on your memory," I answered. "I want to get rid of it right now, but what if we need it?"

We crested a hill, a view to the horizon in every direction. I pulled off the road as Albert King finished being, "Born Under a Bad Sign", and Aaron Neville, with a reminder that, "Everybody Plays the Fool" (Sometime).

"Pass me the waist pack, will you?" I asked. She dug it from under her seat while I opened the rear passenger door and got into a little tool box that came with the car, finding the one substantial screwdriver. With it I went to work on the door panel. Before long I had it loose enough to stuff the gun pack behind it. After a minor spat, Tara gave me all her money, except \$100, which along with my money, I put into a dirty sock and slid behind the panel, which I re-secured while Tara leaned in from the opposite door.

"Since we're heading south, tell me how what you're doing might go south on us?"

"A good search for one thing," I said, "with dogs trained to smell gun powder."

"Can they do that?"

"You've heard of bomb-sniffing dogs? Bombs are made from explosives, one of which is gunpowder."

"Then how stupid is it, to not get rid of it now?" she asked.

"As compared to the stupidity of sharing a desolate place with murderous drug cartels, corrupt cops working for the cartels, and not being able to defend ourselves? Then there's Swamis, who wants me dead or alive, and you—very much alive."

"What good's a gun behind a door panel? More likely we get caught or taken to prison for having it there."

"Maybe, but right now I can't bring myself to part with the little fellow."

"Alex, your Spanish is good," she said, as we drove into the emptiness of the Sonoran desert.

"Not really, but sometimes when I get into the flow, it works."

"How much did you offer the cop to help pay his expenses?"

"I offered him ten bucks but he agreed to twenty. He probably sits there most of the day like the down and out guys back home with the cardboard signs—*anything helps*. Only this guy has a gun and a badge."

"If we still have a back home?" she mused.

"In a way, Tara, I think the system here, at least without the cartels, is often better. With the *mordida*, usually there's something that can be done. It greases the tracks. Like the gun—it's against the law but it's not our intention to harm anyone. If a cop finds it and wants it, we might be able to plead ignorance, give him the revolver and a couple of hundred bucks. The bribe usually works. Back home it's all procedure, guilty or innocent. Works fine if you have a dull life and stay out of trouble. Other than that, you fight it out in court. And may the most expensive attorney win! The rule of law, if it isn't patterned on justice, is invidious. I'm more comfortable with this system where for a few bucks I get a chance to talk my way through it. I like options. Like with friends, if you can't have both, take heart over mind. Except with women—go for the ass and legs."

"That right?" she asked. "That's why good looking women without brains are called *bimbos*? And why am I sleeping with you?"

"I have a good body Tara. You said so."

"You got it right the first day Alex. You're on the wrong side of gravity, even with no fat. Put your shirt back on."

"Is that how you feel when I don't wear a shirt?"

"Not when we're alone. Around other people.... Anyway, it doesn't matter. It won't be long before you're back home in Oregon, or in a Mexican jail, or forever at home on this forlorn road

with coyotes picking at your carcass, the sun bleaching your bones to dust for the wind to scatter through the chaparral. We had everything we needed to be great friends and you fucked it up by overstepping the boundaries."

"How can you keep saying that? What about you calling me cowboy and patting the bed beside you? What about you saying either I sleep with you or you'll go out and bring somebody back?"

"That's the difference between men and women, Alex. I wouldn't have pursued it, but you did. Men have to have it. They don't care what they have to do or who they have to hurt to get it!"

Turning up the music, I tuned her out and drove. Bill Medley and Bobby Hatfield were losing that loving feeling. I drifted into thoughts about Phil Spector, the mess his life became, barely noticing we entered San Luis, and oblivious to a black BMW until it passed us at high speed, reentered our lane and slowed, abruptly, as a large panel truck came alongside, forcing us off the road. *Right in town!* My inner whiner indignant at the lack of social decorum.

In seconds we were herded into the back of the panel truck. Two Mexicans secured our hands behind us with white nylon zip ties—really thick ones. The dim light in the back of the truck gave me a chance to get a thumb between the tie and my wrists before the guy reefed on it. Without the thumb I'd managed to work loose, circulation to my hands would have stopped in a short time. He didn't reef on Tara's like he did mine. They threw me down and one of them kicked me hard in the ribs. Tara, they just pushed down. While this was happening, we were moving and we kept moving for about twenty minutes—left turn, two rights, left, right, and then a long straight—to an abrupt stop. The double doors of the truck opened from the outside and I was dragged, kicked, and punched towards a large shed. Tara was walked, but roughly. The sun's weight rested on distant hills and I could hear birds.

There were three Mexicans, one fat, the driver, and the two who had bound us in the back of the truck. The fat one opened the lock to the shed and the other two hustled us in. Tara first, then me. One had me by the nylon tie, his huge fist between my wrists, lift-

ed above my shoulders. Pushing me though the doorway, he gave another reef on the tie and hit me on the back of the neck with such force that I took one step and blacked out.

I don't know how long I'd been face down when I came around to the sound of a car pulling up outside. I couldn't get up to take a look so I asked Tara to look, which was possible because the shed was built of thick, vertical planks, which had been nailed up wet, leaving a gap between them when they dried.

"It's our car," she said. "Two men."

"Do you see the others?"

"Yeah, there's five all together."

"Help me up, Tara."

I stumbled to the closest point between me and the men outside where I put my ear to a gap and listened for what they were saying. At times everyone was talking and all I got were a couple of words. I was starting to get the drift of the conversation when something at the other end of the shed startled me.

"What's that, Tara?" I whispered loudly.

"It's other men. Mexicans. They're tied like us, only their feet are tied too. They have canvas sacks over their heads. Some of them can hardly breathe. They've been gasping for air."

"We're in a bad place, Tara," I shouted. The men outside heard it. One guy said something and they all laughed. I pleaded, like a sacrificial victim, begging the high priest for his life. I had a family. This woman was only giving me a ride. I needed to get back with my family who would give them everything to let me go. There was fear in my voice. I asked if they spoke English? The one who'd spoken earlier said, "Hombre, you sad motherfucker! Those other poor fuckers in there with you—they know what's coming—they accept their fate. You know why *gringo*? Because they're Mexicans. Their life is hard and their death will be harder, but they'll die like men."

"My wife will give half a million dollars to get me back into the States immediately! Half a million!"

"Too late asshole. We've already been paid for the girl and for you." I kept on until they all were laughing. They talked for another

er minute or two, until three doors, (I think it was three) opened and closed on the panel truck, which started and headed out the way we had come in. The desert was quiet and I could hear the truck for a long time.

I crossed the shed and began moving down the far wall, board to board with my back to the wall, exploring with my fingers, which were quickly losing feeling. I worked up close to the group of sitting and squatting men, looking for something metal or masonry, something sharp or rough. There was nothing. I stumbled in the dimness until I bumped into the wall with the door and felt along the wall. Nothing. At the corner, I turned towards where Tara was sitting, tripped and fell into the dirt on my face and cried out. One of the men sitting at the other end of the shed let loose a string of Spanish invectives, calling me a woman and a bitch. He wanted to kill me. They would kill me, given the chance. Even in the face of certain death, they would welcome an opportunity to kill a spineless gringo.

What I'd tripped over was a concrete pier block, without a post. My neck ached dreadfully, along with the ribs on my right side where I'd come down hard on my face and nose. With little feeling left in my hands, I had to act fast. The pier had been set in concrete, which served me, because it didn't move. I scooted my butt against it, as I continued to wail, begging for my life. At the same time, I rubbed the zip-tie vigorously up and down against an edge of the concrete. Soon it wore through and I sat in the dirt sobbing and pleading, working frantically to restore some circulation to my hands. I walked across the shed whining and pulled Tara to her feet.

"You son of a bitch," she growled! I grabbed a handful of shirt and the back of her neck and pushed her towards the pier block where I sat her down hard and began working the nylon against the pier. Soon, she could do it better herself.

I went back to the other wall and listened to what sounded like someone walking outside, not talking. One man? One armed man should be able to keep watch over a locked shed of helpless peo-

ple. I kept up my sniveling, using a few words of Spanish. "Señor, hay mas de ocho mil dolares in el auto. Todos para usted! Por favor Señor! Quiero ir con mi familia. Quiero cambiar el dinero por mi vida! Por favor Señor! I heard one of the car doors open and the dome light came on. It was the fat guy. He had the driver's door open, looking under the seat, reaching across to the glove box, trying to see what might be under the dash. I kept watching as he moved to the back seat, placing his weapon on the roof while he searched. An AR-15. Lethal and American made.

Tara had come up beside me, watching through the next space. "Go back where you were." I said. "Sit down and cry like you're in pain. Señor, ella me dice en donde esta el dinero. Por favor Señor, todo el dinero por mi libertad, solo mi libertad." God, my Spanish was butchery but hopefully it was good enough to convince him we had eight thousand bucks hidden in the car. It was our only hope! I kept watching. Tara was crying hard. The guy kept searching. He was ten or twelve feet from me. I could see him beading sweat, in what was fast becoming night. I sighed deeply. If he got the left, rear door panel free, my hopes would go with it. He didn't. Instead, he became more frustrated, the sweat stains under his arms elongating under the dome light.

He retrieved his weapon from the roof and looked towards the shed. I stepped back a foot and whimpered. I scurried across the dirt to remind Tara her hands needed to stay behind her. Hold on to the zip-tie. Make it look secure. I moved back to where I could see him. He was looking towards the shed like he was trying to make up his mind about something. I called out, "Señor, ella me dice donde esta el dinero. Yo se! Quiero solamente mi vida." In a plaintiff voice, I kept offering eight grand for my life. The money was his. She told me where she hid it. Finally, he called out to me, demanding where the money was? If it was where I said, he would let me go. I called out for him to please let me get it for him. For my life—only my life! Just let me walk out into the desert. Please! Slowly he came towards the shed. I told Tara to keep crying. The lock clicked open but he didn't come in. Instead, he told me to open the door, which I did with my foot. He stepped back a few

feet, the AR pointed at my chest. An LED light affixed to the top of the weapon partially blinding me with a small circle of light moving across my chest and face. He motioned me to the Taurus, then made me stop, while he reached back and locked the shed.

If I made one mistake, it would be one too many. I kept mumbling she was terrified because I was using her money to buy my freedom. She screamed like a dying animal. Was she was all right? My mumbling and her shrieking were getting to *Gordo*, who continued to sweat. I kept thanking him, keeping up the talk of trading money for freedom. I backed through the rear, passenger door and slipped into the back seat where my left hand closed around the screwdriver I'd left on the seat when I'd pried the door panel loose. I kept jabbering, some in English, some in Spanish, trying to remember out loud if it was in the left or right door. I sat up to the muzzle of the AR, a foot from my face, saying to no one in particular that I thought it was the door on his side. I moved a quick six inches to the left, then forward past the muzzle of his weapon, grabbed a handful of greasy black hair and pulled his unstable bulk to me, my left hand plunging the screwdriver into his neck, which I worked in all the way to the plastic handle. Bursts from the AR, through the open window and door behind me, sent shockwaves through my spine and brain. I took one good breath, which I held with closed eyes, pulling harder on his hair and working the screwdriver until he stopped moving.

I opened the left, rear door, and got out. My ears were ringing like a race starter at Bonneville—without ear protection. To round things out, in the distance, maybe half a mile away through the darkness, came a single set of white headlights bouncing in my direction. I dragged *Gordo* across the rear seat, trying to approximate how he might position himself to doze, turning him on his back with his lower legs hanging off the seat, his feet on the ground. I checked his weapon for ammunition. Empty! Tara was at the shed door telling me a car was coming. I told her to get far away from me and I turned off the dome light.

The headlights came ever-closer—I didn't have long. In less than a minute they would light up the Taurus. I placed the fat man's weapon on the roof where he'd set it earlier, above his open door. I opened the left rear door all the way, crouched down and frantically worked to loosen the door panel just enough to get my hand and wrist inside—the metal tearing at my forearm as the vehicle came alongside, their headlights illuminating only what was in front of them, making it difficult to see anything off to the side. The damn waist pack wouldn't come through the space I'd pulled loose. I had to unzip it with one hand to get my hand out, with the revolver in it. I slid along the body to the rear, far enough so they couldn't see me. Doors opened and I heard feet on the ground. I took a quick look through the open doors at an SUV, maybe a Chevy, maybe black, with the headlights still on, between me and the shed. Two guys approached *Gordo*.

"Wake up, you fat fuck" said one of them. "We saw the light—get the fuck up!" I pulled back the hammer. Ruger, double action. I held the piece with two hands. One of them kicked the Mexican. I stood up and shot him in the face. Reflexively, the other guy positioned himself to fire through the open doors into the rear of the car where I lay on the ground. Three large caliber rounds came through jagged holes in the body, just above me. I turned over enough to see his feet and ankles silhouetted by the headlights. I shifted and pointed the revolver under the car, pulled back the hammer and fired, hitting the undercarriage. I fired a second time and missed. Two more shots came through the body, one close enough that I felt wind in my hair. Five shot Ruger. Three gone. I contorted myself until I could two-hand the revolver. I fired. The recoil was big and he screamed. A 357 in the ankle probably feels worse than death. He spasmed in pain and went down, his body blocking the light. I could barely see him. I pulled back the hammer again, carefully aimed at his head, and fired. He stopped screaming.

I ripped the rear door panel loose and pulled the waist pack through. In the dark I reloaded. There were two calibers in the

pack, 38 specials and 357's. I re-loaded five rounds, unaware of the calibers. Caring even less.

Never had I felt more alive. Every nerve glistened in my body. Never had I been more disgusted with myself. I reached across the roof of the Taurus, mindful one of them could still be alive, or there might be a third. I fumbled with the AR until the LED light came on, then moved quickly around the Ford, putting light on the bodies. Nothing moved and there was no sound, not even from the shed. I retrieved both pistols from the dirt and threw them into the back seat of the Taurus. Then I dragged *Gordo* onto the dirt, went through his pockets for the key to the shed and rolled the guy I'd shot in the ankle away from the car.

I walked towards the shed and quietly said, "Tara?" Nothing more. I held the light so it wouldn't be in her face as I unlocked and pulled open one of the doors. She came out and said nothing as we walked to the Taurus. I opened her door and she got in. I closed the front and rear passenger doors, walked around the car and used my foot to close the rear door, then opened it again, retrieving the money sock from behind the panel and closed the door. The keys, thankfully, were in the ignition. I started the engine, put it in drive, turned on the headlights and left the parking lot trying to remember the order of turns we made to find this place. I drove about a mile, maybe less, at cross-purposes with myself, feeling like some murderous psychotic until I remembered psychotics have no problems. That wasn't me. Then, for no apparent reason, I turned the car around in a long, arcing curve, the drive wheel spinning, almost getting us stuck in loose dirt and sand, and headed back in the direction we came.

"What are you doing?" asked Tara in disbelief.

"I can't leave those guys in there to die."

"Are you crazy? They're a drug cartel and they want to kill you! Have you already forgotten?"

"I haven't forgotten but they can barely breathe. If it weren't for the war on drugs they'd be picking lettuce in Salinas."

We pulled up near the shed and I got out, started the Tahoe, turned on the headlights, backed her up, then pulled forward to light up the shed doors, both of which I opened all the way, keeping my revolver aimed into the shed in case anyone had gotten loose. They were still at the far end, in a clump. I could hear labored breathing. I told Tara to come over, to bring a pistol from the back seat of the Ford, making sure her finger wasn't on the trigger. I asked her to lay the pistol in my hand, which she did.

"Thank you—gun etiquette," I said.

I gave her my revolver. "Thank you," she said.

"Hold it with two hands, firmly, but not too tight. Point at what you want to shoot and squeeze off rounds. No fast trigger pull. I'm thinking you won't need to shoot, so keep your finger off the trigger unless you mean to shoot."

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing dangerous." I went to the driver's door of the Chevy, set the pistol on the seat, took the keys and pulled the hood latch. I put the keys in my pocket and opened the hood. Groping around the engine compartment, I pulled loose a handful of spark plug wires, which I took to the Taurus, tossing them into the back seat. Reaching under the front, passenger seat, I found my second waist-pack with the Kabar knife. I walked back and retrieved the pistol from the front seat.

"Here we go Tara. Keep a close watch!" I walked into the shed.

"Okay English speaker. You translate now! The guys outside are all dead. The *gringo* killed them. Now he's going to help you!" I waited a few seconds.

"Are you going to translate or am I going to leave you here?" He told them what I said.

"Everybody on your stomachs with your heads towards me!"

I checked each set of hands, making sure they were still tied. Then I tried cutting the zip-tie from the neck of the English speaker—the width of the blade choked him even more. "Momentito," I said, scooting out of the shed to the back of the Taurus, returning with a pair of wire snips I'd seen in the tool box. Quickly, I had all seven hoods off. Each guy said, "Gracias, Señor." So much for

drug cartels having no manners! Then I took the pistol, a fine Glock, 9mm, and aimed it at the translator's face—a sweet face, which would turn young girl's heads. I told him to swing his feet to me, which he did, and I snipped the tie that bound his feet. Keeping a distance from him, I had him walk to me as I backed up. I called for Tara to start the Taurus and turn it around, heading out, then hit the horn. I motioned for the translator to come and sit against the pier block where I made the motion of rubbing the zip-tie on the concrete. He did it and I told him to stop. The horn sounded. I backed out the door and ran to the Taurus. *Sweet thing* had left the passenger door open for me.

We drove towards San Luis with me as the navigator for the turns.

"That was wonderful, Alex! I can't believe you went back for them. When you got the hoods off and they said thank you, I felt like crying. Some of them were young boys."

I didn't say anything. Most likely, given the opportunity, they would have killed me and raped her. But they're human beings, and nobody should die like that! She asked if I cut them all loose and I told her what I'd done. I wanted the one guy, to have to carry a second guy to the pier block. A chance for all of them to get away, but getting free would take some time.

"You had the keys Alex? Why did you need to take wires from the engine?"

"Because Mexicans are good mechanics and even better improvisers. One time in Baja, I came on these guys who were broken down, needing a fuel pump. I drove them to town but it was a Sunday and the auto parts place was closed. We couldn't find the owner. They didn't want a ride back to their car so I headed north. A few hours later, I was sitting at an outdoor cafe and here they came, with a five-gallon, clear-plastic container bungeed to the roof with gasoline sloshing back and forth. From the bottom of the container they'd connected a metal tube to the engine compartment. When they saw my truck they cheered as they went by. They'd removed the hood and tied it across the trunk with a mess of twine. My waiter explained how they couldn't stop because

they'd pinched the end of the tube, allowing just enough gas into the carburetor to maintain twenty-five or thirty miles an hour. That they could come up with that fix, and it took the waiter to explain it to me, sealed the deal that Mexicans can always find a way. So, no. I didn't cut them loose. If I had they might be gaining on us right now."

Tara drove west towards Mexicali, a place I didn't want to go. Instead we made a few jogs, south and west, until we connected with 5 and headed towards San Felipe with threads of silver and fingers of grey, insinuating the night sky behind us.

12

All a guy wants in a woman is for her to be funny, good looking enough to keep him interested, and given the choice, she'd rather talk with him than mess with her phone.

The highway sign for Mexicali took me back to Hoyt Axton. I was a kid in Huntington Beach when I first heard him sing "Greenback Dollar". From what I know about him, like the song, he didn't give a damn about a *greenback dollar*. He had fun, lived hard, and died early. His song "Evangelina" tells about a guy trying to cross the great desert, south of Mexicali, to get to his woman. I sang a couple of verses. "Did you write that?" she asked.

"I wish," I said, and told her about Hoyt. How his mother, Estelle, a white women, was the co-founder of Stax Records, maybe the best R&B label—ever. Axton, she was the 'ax' in Stax! "And his aunt gets a star by her name. She wrote "Heartbreak Hotel" for Elvis."

"Are we heading where he goes in the song?"

"No, Evangelina lives in Porto Penasco, on the other side of the Gulf."

"The Gulf of Mexico?"

"Yeah, or the Sea of Cortez if you like? The Colorado River, or what's left of it after Arizona and California get done siphoning it off, runs down through Yuma and meets the gulf south of San Luis. Where we're heading is San Felipe."

"You sang it well. That guy who put down your singing was wrong."

"Thanks Tara, I'm not a great singer, but maybe tonight I was visited by my better angels."

I found myself struggling to not be overwhelmed by what had just happened. It loomed in my now, jarring and coloring any thoughts of the future. For the longest time neither of us said anything.

"So, the Gulf separates the mainland from Baja?" she asked.

"Yeah, and it's long, more than a thousand miles. Steinbeck wrote a book about it, cruising and collecting with his naturalist friend Doc. In the 40's, it was thought to be the cleanest sea in the world. Even in the sixties and seventies when I first came here, the water was so clear. Not much industry and a small population."

"Sounds like heaven."

"It was. At the time we didn't realize what we had."

Another long pause until she asked, "How can people be so horrible to one another?"

"I don't know? I can't think about it now without seeing myself in it. But a week ago..." She interrupted me:

"What do you think? How could Mexico have become what it is? Could that happen back home? Could we become like here?"

I thought about Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the Spanish Civil War, where Pablo slowly changes into a monster. His life is nothing but killing and war. In the end he has to be killed by his friends, his own band, who are fighting the fascists. I told her what I was thinking.

"The longer the violence goes on, the worse it gets?"

"Exactly," I said. "The war on drugs is like that. It's mostly Mexico now but we keep feeding a monster with our money and

weapons, but mainly with our laws. Had we legalized drugs I don't think this would be happening."

"Wouldn't legal drugs make everything worse?"

"I don't think so. They haven't stopped drugs but they have created a monster!"

I'd had enough of this talk so I changed back to being DJ. First the Hoyt songs, then "Heartbreak Hotel".

We came into San Felipe with me remembering back a long time when I came here with Scott and his two young daughters. We'd taken hours to walk the main street, with Scott talking with vendors in his good Spanish. I bought some dark wood carvings of dolphins and whales. The girls bought marionettes. Scott bargained for the longest time and bought a blanket he thought to be cotton, except for a small tag, which we later found, indicating mixed fibers. In Mexico that might include radioactivity.

"Alex, I'm so hungry."

The last time we'd eaten was in Arizona, yesterday morning. We'd eat soon but first I wanted to get through town. I stopped at Pemex to fill up knowing there might not be gas further along. Leaving town, Tara asked me to find a place to pull over so she could make sure we still had our food and water. I pulled over at the turnoff for Punta Estrella. She got out and opened the back while I studied the map. When I was finished, I asked if she wanted to stay here and eat, or eat on the road?

"There's nobody here," she said, "and the view's wonderful, so I'd rather we stay here. I wish we had some beach chairs."

"Since we're sitting in the car for so many hours, maybe we're better to do a *Tavola Calda*.

"What's that?"

"When I lived in Italy, they had lunch counters by that name, where everyone stood and ate. Of course they had little counters for the food. I think it means *hot table*."

"We can match that," she said, fetching her small blanket and spreading it on the hood.

A four-course meal at a fine restaurant is less than great when you're not particularly hungry. Maybe you're out to dinner because your wife cooked all week and it's time, but food tastes best when you're hungry. Like the Buddhists say, *When the monk's hungry, the monk eats*. If only I could remember that. Today, a tin of kipper snacks with heavy wheat crackers and almond butter rivaled any eatery in New York. And my cup of Arrowhead water, actually four cups, was the best mead. When you're really thirsty nothing comes close to water.

"I asked how people can be so horrible to one another?" Tara asked again. "You talked about the guy in the book but I still have the question?"

"It's difficult. It has to do with the whole of human nature. I think about it economically, politically, and psychologically."

"I don't want to hear about politics," she said, with the first little smile I'd seen in a while. And if you start talking economics, you best keep the guns hid."

"Okay, let's talk psychology. Every time you ask something I feel like a teacher who's seduced his student and wants to educate her."

I looked at her face, at the light in her eyes.

"Can I tell a little story?"

"Oh, please professor," she jibed.

"For a few years, I was studying philosophy at UC Santa Cruz. The place was a scene. One of my classes, *Cruelty and It's Victim*, was taught by a strange man who took a fancy to me. When he'd describe a ghastly murder scene from *In Cold Blood*, or maybe a vampire account from Transylvania, he'd stand next to me and squeeze my shoulder as he went on about the *gashing* and *gnashing* of teeth." This was enough for Tara to emit a chortle. "What's funny?"

"What's funny, Alex? It's you! Of course you'd be the one he'd pick on. You must have been such a rube when you were younger. What'd he look like?"

"Why do you care?"

"I want the whole picture."

"He was in his fifties, a big guy, thinning grey hair and one of those sculpted beard and mustache things."

"You mean a Van Dyke?"

"Yeah, maybe. When he talked about vampires he looked like he belonged. At the end of the term, he gave me a glowing recommendation and asked me to travel through the country with him, visiting some of the sites we talked about in class." That was all she needed.

"Did you go Alex?" she asked, looking at me expectantly.

"Of course I didn't go! The guy was probably queer, with a twist of blood violence!"

"Did he drive a Taurus wagon, Alex?" she asked, mirthfully.

"There were no Taurus wagons."

"How about a panel truck with no windows?" she asked.

The recent past walked across her brow but she powered past it and kept laughing.

"The whole place was like that—the whole department. I had a logic teacher with four names. The first three were Jean Claude Wolfgang. He was always saying stuff like, *if P, then possibly P*. And the woman he married practiced voodoo dancing. I guess opposites attract."

"Like us?" she said with a smile.

"Yeah like us. And it's good you finally admit it, although we're not exactly opposites. Your beauty gets us into big trouble, then my wisdom and fearlessness gets us out of it. Which allows you time to deal with your self-doubt and your ongoing distrust of my motives."

She playfully slapped my face, not hard, but right on the area where I'd fallen on my cheek and nose. She apologized twice when she saw how red and cut my nose was.

I kept on, "But the worst of my professors was my advisor, an Indian who spoke the King's English with perfect diction—in a silk ascot. One day in his office, he was asking why I wouldn't conform to his protocol, addressing me by my last name, with just a hint of disdain. Why, he asked, did I feel the need to ask so many questions and bother so many people? He looked over at Miller, another

er student, who was doing some typing for him with his back to us. He asked me, "Why can't you be more like Miller here?"

"Because Miller's an idiot who doesn't have any questions of his own!" I said. Miller gave a quick glance and went back to his work.

"But that's not the story I want to tell. Who matters more is Dr. Stephen Pepper, an octogenarian from Berkley, who came down to teach a semester when one of my professors committed suicide." This made Tara laugh. I enjoyed her humor darkening up. "He was old, but not too old to walk, and all semester I walked around campus with him, listening to his experiences and hearing what he made of them. He'd written a great little book, years earlier, *World Hypothesis*. That book was at the heart of our talks."

"Why'd he spend all his time with you?"

"Because when class ended, everyone was gone, as if he were some high school substitute teacher—except old and in the way."

"How old were you?"

"I don't remember. Maybe twenty-three."

"Sounds like you got interested in things early," she said.

"It was a long time ago but the talks stay with me. Over the years, I've worked his ideas into their most pared-down form, basically five things. You wanna hear them?"

"If it doesn't go on and on?"

"Okay, the majority of people, loosely categorized, fall into four groups. Five to be fair. One we'll call *mechanists*. They see everything in mechanical terms, even life forms. Because they see everything through the scientific method, they can be pedantic."

"You know anybody like that?" she asked.

"Next come the *organisists*. They see life in everything—even in the scientists. They're the innovators of the full one-minute body hug, practiced most often at food coops. They may marry the scientist. Then we have the *contextualists*. They see everything in context of something else. You know, *nothing exists on it's own, everything's in change, so you can't step in the same stream twice*. They're fun, because when pushed, they can't say anything, be-

cause nothing exists—to say anything about. They're the ones at parties who say something like, *there are no absolutes*, and you come back, *absolutely!* Last, are the *formists*. They live in the world of ideas where there is no beautiful Tara, merely Tara participating in the unchanging, ineffable idea of beauty. Immutable beauty—immortal. Not this mortal rubbish we gaze upon."

"Thanks so much," she said."

"No worries. Remind me later to tell you why this lot's the most dangerous. There's one more group, much smaller, but worth their weight in gold. Stephen called them *root metaphorists*. What they do is hone their curiosities into good questions. They want to know and their vehicle is the right question. They don't know about things like religion so they're agnostic. Agnostic about all they find to be unknowable. Spiritual certainty bewilders them. They make use of the scientific method, keeping in mind the Hindu possibility, that existence may be a dream. They don't profess to know so they're easier to get along with."

"Damn," she said. "For a moment I was thinking you were in that group but you're much too self-important. So all the horrible things people do can be explained through these five groups?" she asked.

"Explained, no, but understanding what motivates people helps. One more thing about UC Santa Cruz. There were no grades, just pass and no pass."

"Not even fail?" she asked

"Not even fail."

"That explains how you got through."

Some might find Tara's banter exasperating but I was thriving on her irony and her sarcasm. She keeps it fun. Besides, anyone exasperated by her would bore me.

"One last thing, each professor had to write a critique of his student." Which got her laughing again.

"I don't see, given that criteria, how you graduated?"

"Good point. Stephen wrote that I was the best example of a simple language philosopher he knew. I was touched to have him say that about me."

"I can see why he said it." she said, without her usual sarcasm.

"Thanks Tara. First the comment about my singing and now this. I don't know if I can deal with two compliments from you"

"Best enjoy it." she said. "I've decided I'm a *formist*. From now on you'll have to settle for the idea of it."

We continued south until Tara asked me if we were coming to another town soon. "Yeah, we'll be in Puertocitos in a few minutes." I didn't mention that seven or eight miles south of town the paved road ends, the beginning of 100 miles of rough road—rough even by 4x4 standards. There's an easier way to go, through Ensenada, a big city, but I needed some time away from drama, just the two of us. Safe. Along this sea. For that I was willing to risk a bad road.

The road paralleled the coast, which was sometimes beach and sometimes rocky. Soon it turned inland and crested a long rise, opening a vista of coastal desert. We met few vehicles. More headed towards San Felipe than south. Nothing to worry us. Fishermen going north in tired family sedans. Everyone waved.

"That book with the formists. That's an important book for you?"

"It is, but I more enjoy seeing things through a novel."

"Such as?"

"There's so many. Some writers like Steinbeck get people so right."

"Which novels?"

"For Steinbeck, it's *The Grapes of Wrath*, his masterpiece. And I love *The Wayward Bus*. But for us it's Robert somebody, who wrote, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*."

"Why's that?"

"Long story. Later." One more rise in the road and the fishing village of Puertecitos set redolent in the distance, backdropped by the Sea of Cortez.

We stopped at a small cafe, north of town, which I remembered as closed down but was now open. I walked around the car, surveying damage from the drug war. Passing through the portal, I took a

deep breath, resolved to enjoy these next days on this wondrous coast.

“At the checkpoints, how will you explain the bullet holes?” she asked.

“Maybe they won’t ask,” I said. “But I’m amazed that not one slug took out the window, or hit my revolver and ammo, or the money sock.”

It hadn’t been three hours since we stopped to eat but we ate again, slowly over an hour and a half. We were the sole patrons, having the proprietor, Ernesto, to ourselves. Between beans, rice, corn tortillas, with fresh fish and salad, we sipped lukewarm Tecate beers and talked. We asked about the cartels and he told stories. I knew it was bad but every story made it worse. He had some first and second-hand experiences. I asked about cartel activity on the road south and he shook his head no. Maybe in San Felipe, for sure in Ensenada, but the road south was too much for their pretty vehicles. I asked about the Federales. He said they were corrupt. They’d always been corrupt but more so now since President Calderon had begun fighting the cartels. Many police were paid more each month by the cartels than by the government. He thought it good that the military had a checkpoint south of town. It slowed drug traffic along this route and we best not be carrying anything illegal. I asked about places to stay and he recommended his sister and her husband, who had a place on the beach, with *palapas* for shade, fresh water, and a new catch of fish, every day.

We found the place, a few miles south, in the midst of three *campos*. To get to it, we had to drive a dirt road adjacent the highway for a quarter mile. The campo was beautiful, rustic, and not visible from the highway. We met Ernie’s sister’s husband, Ivan, who rented us one of the six *palapas*, for five dollars a day. The area was clean, no other campers except an older couple in a vintage, tall van, parked at the farthest *palapa*. We asked Ivan if there was someplace in town we could get beach chairs. He told us no. Tara had me move the car with the rear facing the sea so we could leave the back open to the view. I wondered about insects but I did what she asked. While she set up the back for sleeping I gathered

up the firearms and ammunition in an Ashland Coop canvas bag. When she was done, she'd made it look inviting. With our food, the guitar, and our bags on the front seat, we had almost the equivalent of a single bed.

I suggested a walk. We changed to shorts and tee-shirts and I asked if she'd brought a bathing suit. She went into her bag and came out with a smallish, cotton print bikini she could hold in one hand. "I'm looking forward to that," I said. Digging into my bag I found my trunks, remembering how long I'd deliberated whether I'd need them. I clicked on my waist-pack, slung the co-op bag over my shoulder, and we walked down the beach.

"Why'd you bring your knife when you have three guns?"

"Because we won't have them on the way back. We wouldn't get through the checkpoint with them. Besides, I'm feeling lousy about a life I have to shoot my way through. If we were a couple of travelers who'd been kidnapped by a drug cartel and gotten away, we'd be feeling pretty good right now. But I killed some Feds, or pseudo-Feds. They'll be looking for us everywhere."

"So what do you think we should do?"

"For now, we have to stay away from places where we know there'll be narcos or police."

"How can we do that?"

"Like Ernie said. This is the only safe stretch of road."

The afternoon sun was moving across the peninsula towards the Pacific coast, its slanting rays coloring small waves each time a wind came onshore. We sat on a rock outcrop watching large brown pelicans float above the water, then make Stukka dive-bomb runs, straight down, plunging into the sea, completely disappearing. More often than not coming up with a fish. We walked farther and as we were about to turn back, a snake came into the road. Maybe thirty feet ahead—a diamondback rattler. We stood absolutely still. I don't think they see well but when their tongue does that flicking thing they detect any movement. The wind carried our sounds and scents away from the snake, which turned its head in

several directions, its tongue flicking all the while. When satisfied, it moved to cross the road. I walked slowly towards it, to within ten feet. Then, I took one more cautious step as it coiled and rattled. It looked angry and I backed off. If I got bit out here... I remembered my dad telling me how he'd worked for Crosby at the chicken ranch in Tallahassee during the depression, where he became the resident snake man. When a snake messed with the chickens, he used two hardwood sticks, moving the one in his left hand to distract the snake, then smacking it with the other one. I wish I could love my dad more than I do.

On the way back to camp we stopped at the rock outcrop. Not even four wheel tracks came out here, with no traces of two-legged visitors. The sea in front of us was two shades of translucent green. Maybe it's the light here? In Oregon I think of the ocean as blue but in Baja, somehow, it's often green.

"You see where it's darker green?" I asked, pointing to a place, some forty feet off to our right.

"Yeah, I see it."

"Can you tell it's deeper there?"

"Obviously."

"Can you hit that spot with something that weighs two or three pounds?"

"If you can, I can," she said.

I took one of the pistols, which was more than three pounds, and practiced my throw without letting it go. On the third windup I let it fly and it plopped into the dark green, though just barely. With the next pistol I threw farther, but too far, into the light green. Tara smiled.

As if a carnival barker on the midway, she yelled into the wind: "Take something for your cutie from the bottom shelf, but nothing for that second throw!" She reached into the bag and came up with my precious little, stainless-steel, five shot, loaded, 357, snubbed-nose Ruger, and without a practice throw laid it into the deep green on a graceful arc. We headed back towards camp, my arm around her shoulders and her's about my waist.

"How do you feel without the guns, Alex?"

"Better, worse. Makes me think of a line from *The Onion Field*. This one cop, whose partner has just been gunned down by two psychos who kidnapped them in LA, then drove them out to a farming area, maybe Bakersfield, makes a run for it. He crosses an onion field at night, finally banging on a farmer's door. The farmer's son says, "I'll get the guns." As good a line as John Wayne ever uttered. People want justice and sometimes guns provide it. The Second Amendment, even with the crazies carrying guns around the mall, is better than what they have here: drug cartels on the streets and tough gun laws. Fuck that!"

13

"It is a sin to be silent when it is your duty to protest."

Abraham Lincoln

Coming back into camp, the sun was low, another hour before it would settle behind the Sierra Gigantes or whatever mountains are to the west. Fluffy cumulus banked the mainland to the east, over a quiet, patent leather sea, slowly divulging its palette of color in brushstrokes of mountain light.

We came onto the vintage van and the old couple, who were sitting out in low chairs watching the evening. My inclination was to pass by but Tara went up to them and introduced us. She was Nancy and he was Vern, from Berkeley. They'd come here many times .

"Ivan brought a chair to your palapa," Nancy said. "He told us you had no chairs. We had an extra, so I took it over for you."

"Looks like you're traveling light," said Vern. "If you want, you can eat with us. We could use the company."

"We'd love to," said Tara. "And if you like music, Alex plays the guitar and sings," she said, looking at me with a challenge.

"I'd have to go back into town for a bottle of wine to make that happen," I said.

"No problem," said Vern. "Nancy and I've been together almost fifty years, so we bring several boxes of wine to spice up the conversation."

"We bought some bundles of firewood but we forgot an axe," said Nancy, making me feel like we could bring something to the party. Half an hour later, with the sun gone and the sea a deep grey, we had the beginnings of a good fire. Tara and Nancy were in the van fixing food while I sat out with Vern, drinking wine and talking. I didn't know what to tell Vern about what we were doing here, with Tara inside with his wife—like cop shows where they take the two suspects into different rooms for interrogation. Any talk between Nancy and Tara could make questionable something I might say to Vern, so I took the initiative to ask about his life?

"Do you still work Vern?"

"Not any more. I worked until my seventy-fifth birthday, last year. That was enough."

"What'd you do?"

"I taught constitutional law at Berkeley."

"The university?"

"Forty-five years."

"You were there for the whole thing. Mario Savio, conga lines, the Berkeley Barb, Telegraph Ave., Country Joe and the Fish, the Jabberwock. Vietnam!"

"Yes," he chuckled, "but you seem to know more about what was going on than I did."

Tara called for me to bring out a low table, a beautiful old piece, maybe three feet long, two feet wide, with six-inch legs. I set it in the sand where we placed chairs around it and the girls brought food: corn tortillas, fresh fried fish, guacamole with tomatoes and onions, ground up cabbage and greens, corn chips, and cilantro. Nancy had forgotten something and came back with a tub of salsa.

"Vern taught constitutional law at Berkeley," I said.

"And did Vern tell you what Nancy was doing while he was teaching? She's worked forty years as a defense attorney—like a public defender."

"No and yes," said Nancy. "When people finish law school, many of us want to do something helpful. Working in the justice system they get jaded and most end up going for the money. I wasn't smart enough to do that. Three of us set up an office in Berkeley and worked for whatever people could pay plus whatever grants and contributions came our way."

"When did you stop?" I asked

"Maybe next year," she laughed. "I don't work as much as I used to but watching a retired Vern mope around, I'll hang in a while longer."

"How long did your two friends stay at it?"

"They're still at it. Actually, one of them died last year but we look at it the same way Levi Stubbs did when one of the Four Tops died. They didn't replace him and, as long as there's the *Tops*, he's one of them. When they do a show his family gets his pay. It's the same with us. He's part of us until it's over."

Tara looked at me with a look, conveying, *these people defend the poor and the Constitution*, if a look can convey that, and I gave her back a *so do we* look.

Dinner was great. It wasn't just the food, being with these people made for a needed peacefulness and equilibrium. The food and wine just added to it. Our hosts talked freely about who they were and what they were doing while Tara and I mostly listened. I was thinking about it, over a fourth fish taco, poking the fire with a stick. I'm not somebody who likes keep things in, and I felt like talking about it.

To buy a little time, I told a story about my friend Dave, a rebel, a jokester, always in and out of trouble. As a senior in high school, he asked a cheerleader out and she dissed him. He kept working on her until she relented to go out, once, if he agreed to leave her alone afterwards. He picked her up in his 55 Chevy, a bit ratty, but at least a coupe. Without an agreed destination they began driving

south. In those days, if you lived in San Diego, a good date spot was Tijuana but they lived closer to Long Beach and Mexico was more than a two-hour drive. Dave suggested they go to TJ. The cheerleader, having conservative parents, had never been. They spent an hour walking around the downtown, then Dave continued driving south. His date became anxious when they reached Ensenada where Dave insisted they continue to San Quintin, the end of the pavement and the beginning of a thousand miles of dirt road.

That was another sixty miles. It was late and she was reluctant to go. They made a deal, and a week later, over a badly-maintained dirt and gravel road, in a car ill-equipped for the trip, they arrived in Cabo San Lucas. Dave agreed to assure everyone that her honor hadn't been compromised—which was important back then. She would wire her parents that the trip was her idea.

My friendship with Dave began years later. I asked him if they'd been lovers but he wouldn't tell. One night, in Huntington Beach, we ran into her—the cheerleader. She was older, without Dave's youthful genetics, but she had *good bones*, suggesting a beauty in high school. They hadn't seen each other for years. She now had two kids and was a realtor. After they finished catching up, I had to ask about the trip to Cabo. She pinched my cheek. "The defining experience of my life!"

Everyone enjoyed the story, notwithstanding some ethical questions about Dave kidnapping the cheerleader. I persisted with a *no harm, no foul* take. Nancy confronted us: she worked with people in the worst kinds of trouble and she wondered if Tara and I were in trouble? I looked to Tara through the firelight.

"Okay?"

"Okay," she said, and we spent the better part of an hour recalling the events of our trip. In the end I tried to make light, telling Nancy how wrong she was to include us with the *in trouble* group. She avoided my joke with a look intended to censure me for pandering to the absurd—one of my principle tactics for dealing with crisis.

"What do you intend to do?" she asked. I told her we weren't sure. "Do you think you can continue functioning with this going

on?" she asked. I said I was fairly good at dealing with situations where the outcome looked bad.

"What about you, Tara?" Tara said she went back and forth, depending how much she trusted my willingness and ability to see us through this.

"What about your family, Alex? How long can this go on before your priorities change?"

"I don't know? I love my wife and kids, and my friends at home, but now I love Tara and I can't leave her."

"You love Tara, Alex?"

"Yes, I love Tara. I'm living two realities. Almost separate realities. Unless Tara wants me out of her life, I don't want to be without her."

"You see Nancy?" said Tara. "Alex is delusional. He somehow thinks all this can work out!"

"Do you love Alex, Tara?"

"Alex is older and married!" exclaimed Tara.

"If Alex wasn't married would you love him?" Tara didn't answer—she stared into the fire. "I'll say one thing Tara, Alex has already brought you through, what sounds like impossible situations, and he may find a way though all of this."

"Nancy, you come from a different time," she said. "When heroes in books and movies pulled off the impossible. Things are different now. Those days are gone."

"Tara, no one ever pulled off the impossible, but sometimes the improbable, and you're part of a generation who need heroes. More than you can imagine."

The evening had taken on a somber tone and Nancy defused it, "This looks bad tonight you two. Most of my days begin with things looking bad but they usually look worse to the people involved than they do to me. When I get a rough one, I like to confer with Vern, who brings the big picture. So I'm thinking we talk about this again in the morning."

"What about that guitar?" said Vern "What do you say Alex? You got a few songs in you before bed?"

I did, but I hadn't played in a while. I took a flashlight from Nancy and went to our camp. I'd never seen the guitar and it wouldn't be what I was used to. Some people don't change strings, or they break one and it doesn't get replaced. Back at the fire I switched chairs with Tara. Hers had no arms, better for playing. I opened the tweed case and found a 60's Martin D18 with all the strings, not fresh, but alive. There was also a tuner, capo, and plenty of picks. I tuned up and asked what they wanted to hear?

"What can you play?" asked Vern.

"I dunno? At home, Carla asks why I play the same 5000 songs, over and over." Everyone laughed.

"Vern plays the piano and sings," said Nancy. "I know what she means. It's not the songs. It's the number of times I've heard them over fifty years!"

"Play something about the sea," said Tara. I set down a chord pattern for a Bobby Darren song, "Beyond the Sea." It's no *three-chorder* and it has a complex bridge—but a great song. I took some time with the chords until I felt comfortable, then launched into a bluesy rendition. I wasn't in a couple of lines before Vern joined me, with a voice that made better, everything I did. We went through the verses twice and the mood began to shift. Music does that. Nancy added a couple more logs and offered wine, which we all accepted. Vern suggested more Darren songs so I did "Things", then "Dream Lover." I was into it now. I played another five or six songs when I remembered the last time I played music in another country. I took a band break and told the story.

I'd met three Germans, on BMWs, in Central Russia. We visited briefly before they continued west. A week later I was lost—I mean really lost, somewhere along the Russia-Kazakhstan border where even the locals couldn't tell me how to get back to the main highway. With my four words of Russian, no GPS, and a cut-rate map, to be lost in Russia was a cause for concern. But here came the Germans, Christof, Joseph, and Erik. No nicer guy than Erik. They were also lost, each with GPS and the best German maps. I don't think of them as having been lost. That was too coincidental. They were there to find me. Their bikes were bigger, more power-

ful, and they rode faster over rough dirt roads, but I kept up. No matter what, I wasn't going to lose them until we were back on the highway.

After another week alone and four thousand miles, with the Germans having gone on through Southern Russia while I went north to Moscow and Latvia, then across and down through Poland into southern Germany where I pulled around a large gas station to a cafe in back and there were the three BMWs. Inside, Christof said, "Once was chance, the second stretched credulity, but a third time defies reality. So now you are ours, to come with us."

We rode, near Dresden, to a small town where the big guy, Joseph, said I could camp on the back lawn next to his house. A house with marble columns and marble floors. A party was planned that night. I asked if he had a guitar? He did and I played into the night, a night of steaks and good booze. In the morning, after weeks of sleeping along the road in Russia I woke up in an opulent bedroom."

"Enough story!" announced Vern. "We have people here who want to sing! You said something about Country Joe and the Fish. I did "Sad and Lonely Times" Vern knew some of the words. Then he started calling tunes, trying to stump me, but luck was on my side. Everything he called I knew or could fake. Finally, my fingers were sore and I had to stop but Vern insisted on one more. I did a slow version of "Route 66" combined with "Evangelina" as the fire burned to nothing.

Heading back to our camp, for a second time in our friendship, Tara and I had to lean on each other for support. Way past brushing teeth, we both needed to pee, which we did in the sand. She had our bed set up with the sleeping bags laid out as comforters. I undressed. I thought about doing some pushups on the sand and I laughed.

"What's funny?" she asked, from the back of our palace.

"I was thinking about doing naked pushups."

"I thought you'd want to do them in here?" she said.

It was a balmy night. A light cotton blanket would have been better than the bags. Already warmed by the wine and the fire, we used them to lay on. I reached over and wrapped my arms around her back and waist. She was naked. Tiny waves broke along the beach, then rushing back to become the next one. I was already intoxicated but the smell of Tara's body stoned me. Her breath was just a little ripe. When I woke up later, it was colder. I covered us with a sleeping bag and began rubbing my cheek against the side of her face. "Go to sleep," she said.

14

"The Constitution is not neutral. It was designed to take the government off the backs of the people." William O. Douglas, Associate Justice, United States Supreme Court

Nancy was shaking our feet. I looked up at her sheepishly through hungover eyes.

"We didn't tell you last night. Yesterday, we were heading back but we put it off a day. We want to leave around noon. That gives us about three hours and there's much to talk over."

We quickly dressed, did something with our hair and brushed our teeth. They were both inside the van but soon came out with scrambled eggs, corn tortillas, butter, and somehow, fresh orange juice. The serving table had been left out overnight.

"Here's how we see it," said Nancy. "I'm offering to represent both of you and Vern is willing to help. There's two pressing concerns and both need to be addressed. The first is pending charges, which I'll know about when I get home. I'll be surprised if the drug cartel deaths have charges attached to them. Too dicey. Too much to account for."

"Two of the men were Americans," said Tara.

"They were, but the circumstances aren't something our government will want public. The deaths caused by the head-on in Arizona would be difficult if not impossible to link to you. Even if they could prove they were pursuing you, I don't see how they could charge either of you with being causal in the deaths. That they pulled the news story, says to me, they want nothing to do with it. There may be other charges against you. That's the first issue. The second is Paul Don, aka Swamis. The charges against you are like tumors and he's the cancer agent. We have to stop him. If there are no charges, that could be a worse situation for you because he can operate inside and outside the law."

Vern suggested we eat. I hadn't even noticed the sea, framed in wispy clouds, still and windless. We were hungry and I watched Tara eating. She was beautiful, extraordinarily so. It wasn't just physical. She gave off a radiance belonging to the clouds and the sea.

"There's three ways to stop him," said Nancy. "The first is through the courts. We can address any charges, but court, more often than not, sides with the government, and the expense account for Homeland Security is limited only by the wealth of the United States. If we go to court, we go after the agencies and the laws that make it possible for someone like Swamis to operate in unconstitutional and criminal ways."

"Can you do that?" I asked. "Can you challenge charges brought by the government, in such a way as to bring the laws into question?"

"Good question! Depends who's sitting on the bench. It's always a crap shoot who you get for a judge. Some recent laws, since 911, are unconstitutional. And some judges know it. Keep in mind, this country is under a constitutional state of siege and our personal liberties are under attack like no other time in our history. Judges and juries aren't necessarily stupid. During jury selection, I wouldn't be looking for political affiliation—rather for intelligence. I want jurors who can think. Jurors who read. What I'd avoid in seating a jury for your case, is *denial*. Most people know our coun-

try and our economy's in trouble but many don't want to recognize it. Anyway, I'm doubting there will be charges against you."

"Can we expect any help from the government?" asked Tara. "We have a Democratic President." Nancy looked to Vern, and he took over.

"Tara, I supported Barack Obama becoming president, but I wish I hadn't. Many of my friends, after devoting their lives to constitutional scholarship, have a huge fear of this man and his lack of concern for personal liberties. Let me point to an example. The Obama Administration was sued under the Freedom of Information Act by the A.C.L.U. to release documents concerning water-boarding and torture, during the Bush Administration. Given the transparency Obama promised when he ran, this was a no-brainer, yet his justice department fought the suit and prevailed, maintaining these documents and pictures of high-profile detainees were exempt from disclosure because the release would compromise national security. The only rationale for this position is to maintain secrecy and executive power rather than inform Americans as to what really took place. The majority of Democrats still support him because they don't understand he makes the problems worse." Nancy jumped in:

"Because of the encroachment on civil liberties and the abandonment of constitutional guarantees, any court case having to do with you two could easily become a focal point for what's happening in our country. Earlier, I said we have three directions we can pursue. The courts are the first, to answer charges and to make the case you have been denied the protection of the Bill of Rights, but there's two more directions to go. The first is political. In Oregon, Alex, you have two good Senators, Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkely. Over on the coast, not in your district, there's a good member of the House, Pete De Fazio. I've met these men and know them enough to talk to. In California, there are more, plus Governor Brown, if he can still remember why he used to drive around in a pickup truck with Gary Snyder?

"That's the second direction. The third, public opinion, has the capability of influencing the other two. The way we get there is

through the press. First the newspapers. I have friends at the *Chronicle*, and between Vern and I, we could call in favors owed, for an incisive op-ed, which would surely be picked up by the Oregon and Louisiana papers. Adding to that, the visual and audio media will not allow the print media to run with a good story without jumping into the fray. A well-written story about what's happened to you might be taken up by Fox News."

"Making a supporting case for you," said Vern, "whether it be through the courts, the politicians, or the press, needs to be built around constitutional issues. From your account last night, your rights under the First, Second and Fourth Amendments, have been compromised. Nothing new there. These three amendments—the bastards have under perpetual siege."

"What about paying you?" asked Tara.

"Ah, there's always that," said Nancy. "Let's see how this goes forward. I'm thinking we may be able to come up with a defense fund. This case has potential to expose runaway tyranny."

Shortly before one we said goodbye to our friends and they bumped along the dirt road, heading for San Felipe. They had forgotten their chair. They probably meant to leave it. We sat for a time in our own thoughts and for the first time since we'd been together, I felt a complete lack of motivation. I think it had to do with meeting Nancy and Vern. Maybe some responsibility had been lifted from me and I could take the luxury of letting down my guard. Whatever it was, Tara recognized the change and commented on it:

"You seem different?"

"Not different. A little less charged. I'm thinking it's not all on us. We have some friends."

"And we have a whole beach to ourselves," she said. "They left a whole scad of firewood."

"What do you want to do?" I asked.

"I want to stay here until all the wood's gone and we have no food or water. What about you?"

“Sounds good to me. Lets move the car to their campsite. We won’t have to carry all that firewood.”

We positioned the Taurus to where we had the best view and I made the suggestion, after making sure there was no one to see us, she take off her clothes and get wet in the gulf.

“Why?” she asked, with an inquisitive smile.

“Don’t ask, you’ll like it.” She didn’t have so much to take off, a tee shirt, no bra, shorts and small panties. She looked around before deciding to go without the panties, then took them off and ran into the sea. She was a ways offshore before the water reached her waist and she dove in. While she frolicked, I set up supplies on the hidden side of the station wagon. On the sand next to the car, I spread her Indian blanket—hoping she wouldn’t mind. She came out of the water, looking about, then ran to where I waited.

“What’s all this?” she asked with a laugh.

“This is Alex’s Spa,” I said, lifting one of her legs while she used the car for balance. I rinsed the sand from one foot and she stepped onto the blanket so I could rinse the other. Then I had her bend forward so I could pour non-salty water on her head

“This is sweet shampoo, no fragrance,” I said, vigorously washing her hair like I used to do my youngest, down to the scalp. Her hair wasn’t long, and without using too much of our water budget, I rinsed it twice. Then I washed her, not everywhere, just her breasts, her pits, her bush, and her bottom. She was a compliant, smiling subject. I toweled her from head to foot and left her to get dressed while I rushed into the gulf.

Later, we sat naked in our chairs, clean in the afternoon sun.

“Tell me something, Alex.”

“Tell you what?”

“I want to know everything you know and everything you’ve done. Then I want never to hear it again.”

“Carla would love you for that. She says I make her go numb with my stories.”

“Tell me about the book that’s so important for us? And what’s so important about it anyway?”

“I don’t remember what I was thinking when I brought it up but let me give it a shot. It’s like this jitterbug dance instructor told me one time: all rock and roll is divided up into what came before the Kennedy assassination and what came after. Well, of course it’s divided into those two time periods, but does it matter?”

“Wait a minute Alex! You took jitterbug lessons?” she asked.

“No! I rented my hall for his classes. I’m a good dancer; I don’t need no lessons!”

“I’ll decide,” she said.

“Anyway, the book’s called *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. I read it a few times. I do that. Like *War and Peace*, I read it a few times. Once almost at one sitting.

“Nobody could do that,” she admonished.

“Probably not, but one time I read it for a couple of hours on the toilet—had to be surgically removed.

“Enough!” she said.

“Okay, this guy takes a trip from the East Coast to California on an air-cooled BMW motorcycle.”

“Isn’t that the kind you like?” she asked.

“We’re on our way to pick one up. The best model they ever made!”

“We were,” she said.

“Back to the story. He’s with his friend John and John’s wife. They’re on a newer BMW and Robert’s pre-teen son, Chris (I think) is on the back of his.”

“Bad idea,” she said. “That kid will hate him before they get there!”

“He does and Robert doesn’t get why Chris is so sullen. He doesn’t understand that his son doesn’t want to ride on the back of his bike all the way across the country. Anyway, remember Stephen Pepper and the different types of people? Robert (the author) is the *mechanist*. He tries to be a good guy but he’s much better at adjusting valves and carbs than being a dad and he has a difficult time accepting his friend John, who doesn’t want to work on

his bike. When John's bike needs work he'll have it done. He's the *organisist*, the free flowing romantic. Need-less-to-say, Robert doesn't appreciate John's way of doing things."

"What about you Alex? You like to work on machines?"

"I love to work on machines. The reason I rode a KLR around the world, and why I ride airheads, is because I can work on them myself. Sometimes, in my shop, hours go by and I'm in a state of no time and no space!"

"Is that true? I love that feeling!"

"Better than that, I love riding more than wrenching, whole days of riding through timelessness. Never any music on my bike. A day without time is way better! I wrench so I can ride, not the other way around."

For just an instant, I saw her go someplace else.

"What's that about Tara?"

"Just tell the fucking story!" she said.

I crawled across the sand to her chair and put my palms on her cheeks, "Tell me?"

"Tell you! Don't you know? We're never going to ride that bike across the country together. What we get is this..."

"Tara..."

"Don't Tara me! Just tell your little story!"

"You sure you want to hear it?"

"Tell it Alex!"

"Okay, the book has to do with his friend who's in school at the University of Chicago. This is the part that has to do with us. The University of Chicago came up with what's called The Great Books program, the cornerstone of a good education, where Robert's friend Phaedrux is in the midst of that good education, always pushing a question as to the nature of *quality*. But, the Great Books education isn't about questions; it's about answers. The answers are in the books. Set in fucking stone! Out of it comes the world we live in, where good questions are to be traded for answers. You know, we go into Iraq because members of Congress have information we're not privy to. Barack Obama isn't wasting his mandate being a corporate shill. He has a bigger plan because

he's privy to information we can't possibly have. Fuck their information! They don't have shit! Their information kills a hundred thousand people before you can say Donald Rumsfeld! Now it's Homeland Security needing our support to fight the *War on Terror*. Why? Because they know things we can't know. And who are these guys? They're the *formists*—attached to the gods through immutable ideas, which are unfathomable to us mere mortals. Hardly any women in the Great Books series, by the way! The great knowers of life! Cheney knew! Obama knew! Swamis. Need I say more? Anyway, Phaedrus goes crazy, gets kicked out of the university, and Robert suffers his own psychological breakdown in Ashland, my home town, on the next to the last day of his trip!"

"Alex? Aren't you like that? You ask questions but you have huge opinions!"

"There's a difference, I'm opinionated but I don't put huge stock in them. I might say something like, 'A man who doesn't ride a horse, a bicycle, or a motorcycle, is less of a man.' Maybe there's something to it, but it's not absolute. There are men who matter, who don't love two wheels. I suppose there are?"

"*Formism*, this absolutism, comes from Plato and Socrates. Socrates, as portrayed, is a literary figment of Plato's imagination. Socrates, who acts like he doesn't know, but underneath it all, he knows! He's the *philosopher king*, or Plato is. Plato, the great hater of democracy—the father of modern tyranny."

"Alex, I've heard you speak ill of democracy!"

"Yeah, but when it's all said and done, give me a good *bill of rights*. I'm with Churchill: 'Democracy's the worst form of government, except for all the rest.' Then again, Churchill didn't want democracy for the colonials. I've got some advice for all the would-be tyrants out there, advice I live by: start your day with a look in the mirror, reminding yourself: *Today, I'm capable of being a huge asshole. Don't do it!*"

In the midst of my soliloquy, two Mexican soldiers strolled up the beach with automatic weapons. I pulled into my shorts and went to meet them while Tara dressed behind the wagon. They were both

young, no more than twenty, dressed in crisp fatigues with camouflage. I greeted them in Spanish and asked if they spoke English? They didn't. Tara had come out from behind the Taurus and sat down. As we approached I asked her to greet them, which she did and we exchanged names. They were Fernando and Juan. We offered them our chairs and they sat down, with Tara sitting on the sand and me squatting. Fernando pointed out how I squatted like a Mexican.

I told them how much I loved Mexico and how difficult it was for me, now that it was dangerous to travel here. They both nodded in assent. I couldn't help but ask for their perspective on the drug cartels, which they gave in Spanish but too fast for me to get it all so I kept asking them to repeat and slow down while I translated for Tara. I used to feel safe with the military in Baja. Now I wasn't sure. A few billion here, a few billion there... .

They agreed the federal police were often bought off by the cartels and some people were willing to *rat out* neighbors to gain favor with the cartels. I repeated this for Tara. It reminded me of the *Stasi* in East Germany after the wall came down. The archives contained countless stories of family members turning each other in, from misguided patriotism or self-preservation.

I asked about their weapons, both of which were AR-15s—American made, along with their clothing—Desert Storm, GI issue. Things were going along well until I asked Juan if any of the military had been corrupted by the cartels. A noticeable chill came over the conversation. Tara shot me a look of *what the fuck have you done?* I went into damage control with one long run-on sentence about how I trusted the Mexican military and felt safe when they were around. I told them about this one soldier who used to hang around our camp near Mulege where we would drink beer and sing. That lightened things up and Juan asked if we had any beer, which we didn't, but I told them we did have a guitar and asked if either of them could play?

“Play!” said Fernando. “Juan is a virtuoso!” I translated for Tara, who jumped up and went into the Taurus. She came back with a bottle of white wine and cups.

“Where’d you get that?”

“From Nancy. I was saving it in case I liked you but I see your diplomatic skill calls for it right now.” She poured the wine then went back for the guitar. Juan passed his weapon to Fernando, tuned up (commenting it was a beautiful guitar but he preferred nylon strings). Then he began: *Este amor apasionado*, my second favorite song in Spanish, “Volver, Volver”. One I know from Los Lobos.

Juan was a good singer. So many Mexicans are. When I was a kid, it was Italians, blacks, and Mexicans. If you took these groups out of rock and roll, it wouldn’t look the same. Any tension because of my question about corruption in the military was gone the second I added a harmony to the song. After the song, I looked to Tara, asking her to keep their cups full, but to baby ours. Juan did another song, up tempo, which I didn’t know. There’s so much Tex-Mex and Ranchera music I haven’t heard. Then Juan passed the guitar to me, giving up his chair, which I accepted. I couldn’t sing as well but steel strings are my culture. I began, *Tanto tiempo disfrutamos*, the opening words from “Sabor a Mi”, my favorite Spanish song. They both joined in. Then I did “La Bamba”. Afterwards, I told them we had to go because my wife, Tara’s mother would be meeting us at Laguna Chapala tonight.

“Non is posible!” said Juan. “Es muy lejos y la ruta is terrible!”

“What’s he saying?” asked Tara.

“That the road is bad and it’s far to where we’re going to meet your mother.”

“He said the road is *terrible*,” she corrected. “Ask if he’s read *Lolita*?” she said, with a smile.

I asked how far it was to the military checkpoint? Maybe forty-five kilometers. Did they want a ride? They were a bit unsteady from the afternoon heat and most of a bottle of wine. They laughingly declined a ride. Probably wouldn’t bode well to turn up in a car, partially drunk, with a couple of *gringos*. We said our good-byes and they headed farther down the beach towards where we’d tossed the guns.

We packed up quickly and in a few minutes reached the paved road, heading south.

“What’d you make of that?” she asked.

“Not like it used to be. I asked about corruption on purpose. I wanted to see what’d they’d say.”

“Another good move, Alex. A couple of young guys with assault rifles and you’re asking if they’re corrupt?”

“No. Juan and Fernando are pawns in that game. They’re not who would be corrupt. It’s their superiors and my guess was correct. They were affected by the question.”

“Why would they be affected?”

“Because they’re Mexicans, they’re Catholic. They’re god-fearing people. This new wealth and corruption from the cartels has only been around fifteen or twenty years. These guys grew up in families that go to church. They’re devastated by what’s happened.”

It was four in the afternoon when we reached the end of the paved road south of Punta Bufeo. Immediately we slowed from fifty-five to fifteen. The road was gravel and sand, not too bad over the next four miles to the military checkpoint. Before reaching the *palapa*-like structure where I could see three soldiers, we passed another soldier, the point man, maybe 100 feet out from the others. He was in a shaded, round enclosure, some ten feet across, dug into the ground, and fortified with stacked, white sandbags. His face was a dark oak and his serious expression complimented what looked to be a 30 caliber machine gun on a tripod. One of the soldiers, an older officer, with an imperious movement of his hand, ordered us to stop.

“Papeles,” he barked.

“He wants our papers,” I said, handing him our passports, the car title and registration, which he laid out on a small table beside him in the shade where he meticulously went through each page, line by line. It was hot and this guy was beginning to annoy me. Tara noticed. She got out of the car, walked around front, and stood beside him in the shade, giving him her best smile. He pointed to

the car, snapped a couple of commands in Spanish, which I couldn't keep up with.

"Translate for me," she said, keeping her smile. "Tell him I'm pregnant—sick to my stomach. When I get too hot or stressed, I throw up. I was going to throw up so I got out. Now I'm trying to remain calm so I don't throw up on the table."

It was all I could do to keep it together as I translated. Many needed words I didn't know so I used a mixture of Spanish and pantomime. Which slowed his barking but increased his discomfort. He motioned me to pull the car to an adjacent *palapa* with a long table set up for searching bags. Tara walked to the shaded area of the *palapa* by our car. The officer ordered her back.

"Ask him if this is how the military treats tourists in Mexico?" "Tara, this is Mexico. You don't have the same rights as in the States!"

"You better ask him!" she said.

I did, to which there was no reply, as he motioned to the two soldiers, about the ages of Juan and Fernando, to search our vehicle.

"Ask the young guys if they know Juan and Fernando?" she said. They both smiled recognition as their older superior stared them down, demanding that everything from the car be placed on the table. "Todo en la mesa!". Tara maintained her smile, looking a bit contrite as she pointed to her belly, indicating she wouldn't be able to help. Using his jaw as a pointer, first at me, then to the Taurus, he commanded me to unload the car.

"Tell him you're my stepfather and you have cancer. We're in Baja because you wanted your last trip to be in the country you love best—Mexico." I found myself looking for phone lines to this installation as I translated. I didn't see any.

He ordered the two soldiers to unload the car, which they did. I asked Tara why she was *casting her fate to the wind*?

"I love that song," she said. "My dad..."

With huge abruptness he ordered her to shut up but she didn't back down, asking him if it were against Mexican law to speak during a military stop. My anxiety increased because the two

younger guys, who probably hated this prick, stifled small laughs as Tara pushed the issue.

“To answer your question, Dad, I’m quickly getting to the point where I don’t give a fuck what happens.” All three of them recognized at least one English word from her sentence.

The search was methodical and picayune: under the vehicle with mirrors, under the hood, under the seats, and everything from the bags, with the officer taking time to search Tara’s personal items while addressing his questions to me. Then, he examined the battle memorial that was the driver’s side of the Taurus, running his fingers over the jagged edges of more than a dozen bullet holes, which inexplicably had come from inside of the car? He looked at the damage. He looked at me, then at Tara, but he didn’t ask? I had no ready reply.

Tara was over by the two younger soldiers, asking the one with the name-tag, Hernandez, above his pocket, if he knew that without a declaration of martial law, the U.S. military couldn’t search civilians and norteamericanos can’t be stopped or searched by the police, without cause. She asked me to translate.

“Is that true?” he asked. I didn’t answer. It used to be true.

The Capitan pointed to my waist pack. I took it off and laid on the table. This was the first time my knife had been found outside of a metal detector. He unzipped it and took out my knife. His expression changed from a baleful to a puerile sneer. He had us now. There are two kinds of Marine Corps fighting knives, both Kabar. One they issue in boot camp with a nine inch blade, the other, the three quarter Kabar with a six inch blade. Mine’s the three-quarter.

“This is illegal,” he said (in Spanish). I’m taking it.” Tara challenged him:

“It’s not illegal for camping in Mexico. Immigration measured it at the border. It’s legal.”

I translated, and he didn’t know what to do. He had no idea about the length of blades. He motioned me to take my items and my knife. I shook hands with Hernandez, asking him to give my regards to Fernando and Juan. Passing the officer, I proffered my hand. He appeared not to notice.

We'd spent the better part of an hour at the checkpoint and it felt good to be heading south. The late afternoon shadows had begun their slow crawl across the peninsula from the Pacific to the sea. The road worsened. I hadn't driven this stretch of road but I knew to not try it without high clearance. The road had been cut by a bulldozer along the path of least resistance, around steep hills, and along the sides of arroyos subject to flash flooding.

Tara hadn't said a word about the military stop, instead she used what was left of the late afternoon light to pore over the AAA Baja Map.

"You know what *sierra* means, in Spanish?"

"It means mountain," I said with uncertainty, knowing the word for mountain was about the same as in English.

"There's many *sierras* in Baja," she said. "Sierra Juarez, Sierra San Felipe, Sierra Isabel, Sierra San Pedro Martir. What's Martir?"

"It's martyr. Lots of martyrs in Catholic Mexico."

"*Sierra* means saw blade," she said. "Probably because the tops of those peaks are so jagged." Saw blade. Mimetics (is that a word?). A language miming life?

We were moving at no more than one or two miles an hour, in low gear, except when it got steep and I needed to make a hill. Speed was hard to come by through the innumerable potholes with loose gravel at the bottoms. Just enough gravel and sand to spin tires and lose momentum. I wasn't concerned. We could walk to Chapala if we had to. We might have to. Not a single car since the checkpoint.

"I'm half your age Alex. What do I need to know while I still have you around?"

"You're more than half my age," I offered, "and every year that ratio goes down."

"You're right. When I'm fifty, you'll only be eighty three. But what do I need to know?"

"Well, you'll be getting money for the Ford so you need to know about economics." We relentlessly ground our way over an ever-worsening road.

“Good, do like your old teacher said about you. Do your simple language. Teach me everything about economics in five minutes.” I loved that! Yeah, I could tell her what mattered about economics in five minutes.

“Okay, here we go! Economics comes from the Greek. It means *managing a house*. The image was probably chosen because women are better at paying attention to detail. My youngest once asked me why, if he had a million dollars, he couldn’t just put it in the bank and forget about economics? That’s because he thinks the dollar is something fixed, though it changes every day, against every other currency. And against gold. As our debt continues to grow and we continue to mismanage our economy, the rest of the world will lose faith in the dollar, which means we’ll have less purchasing power.

Other than cash, the main investment vehicles are real-estate, stocks, bonds, and commodities.”

“Isn’t real-estate always good?” she asked. “You gotta live somewhere.”

“You do, but a house you buy for 200 thousand can come to be worth 100 thousand, while you’re making payments on 200. Real estate, like another valuable commodity, gold, is real, whereas the dollar’s a fiction, supported by good faith and credit, and like stocks, can literally go to zero when the country or the company loses credibility.”

“What about bonds,” she asked.

“In a country or a world, which is solvent, bonds are great. But in a world of crushing debt, with minuscule interest on bonds, only fools buy bonds. Bondholders have the farthest to fall.”

“So what do I do with my dollars? Real-estate and gold?”

“Not necessarily. When times are good, the dollar’s good for what it can buy plus the interest you get from deposits. Historically, the dollar’s been solid but now it’s becoming a risky investment. Stocks in good companies, in good times, can make you a fortune, as well as in real-estate because, when there’s money around, everybody’s buying. During those times, gold sucks. When things are good—stash your gold!”

“And when times are bad?”

“Stay out of real estate unless you own it free and clear and get the hell out of the stock market and bonds. In tough times, gold’s the bet because it does well when people are afraid. In tough times, stocks are scary because it’s difficult for companies to stay in business. In a bad economy, commercial real estate can be a disaster. You need someplace to live but you can live without a storefront or an office.”

“Okay!” she said. “Times up. Is that all of economics, and if it is, what do I do with my money?”

“That’s the basics. Now it’s up to you to decide if things are going to get better or worse and are there specific reasons why any of the investment classes will do better than the others? Start from there.”

She gave a raucous laugh.

“That’s it?” she asked.

“That’s it!” I said. “Three minutes!”

The shadows were long as we approached Coco’s Corner. I told Tara about Coco and his corner where there was camping, cold beer, and sometimes Coco, with both legs amputated below the knees. I wanted to meet Coco but after the military checkpoint it felt worrisome to spend the night out here. It was too exposed. We would be easy prey for anyone looking for us. I must have shown concern on my face.

“What’s up?” she asked.

“Not much,” I said, changing the subject. “Thinking about a time when my youngest was maybe four years old, in a car seat. We were driving through Medford when a carload of Mexicans in a lowered Impala, luminescent pearl blue, with a girl’s name hand-lettered on the rear fender, pulled up beside us at a traffic light with their stereo giving off huge bass. He watched them for a few seconds before yelling loudly at them. He kept yelling until the driver turned down the music.

“What?” asked the big Mexican, sporting a crisp, black polyester shirt with the top button buttoned.

'Los Lobos', he shouted.

'What?' asked the driver, looking exasperated. My son yelled louder, 'Los Lobos'. The Mexican grinned. 'The little gringo knows Los Lobos'."

"What made you think of that?" she asked.

Somehow, barely, we made it to Highway 1. I'd been expecting the road to Laguna Chapala to rule out Taurus wagons but here we were. I felt vigorous as we turned north.

"Am I wrong? Or did you just turn north?"

"I did. Since we don't know in which direction danger may lurk, I want to drive an hour north to celebrate."

"Celebrate what?"

"To celebrate the gods giving me these days with you."

This stretch of highway runs from El Rosario south to Guerrero Negro, inland, along the spine of the *sierra*. There's one stretch that literally rides the backbone, with guard rails on both sides, for miles. On my many road trips, the one time I hit a deer was here, along this piece of road, with open vistas in both directions, no trees, and few deer. She jumped the guardrail at dusk into my front fender and hood. I didn't see her until the instant she slammed into my car, clearing away any bravado that I could avoid deer on my motorcycle, in Oregon, where there are more deer per square mile than any other place.

We wound our way to Catavina, a desolate place, excepting the Hotel La Pinta, part of a Baja chain. Even the Pemex gas station across the highway, which had been operating during the first decade of my trips south, has now been abandoned for twenty years, first falling into disrepair, now ruin. At the hotel, there's one gas pump and finding the attendant on duty is hit and miss. Tonight was a hit. He was filling a Cadillac Escalade. They were well to do Americans with California plates. The woman got out, opened the back door, doing something with the kids in the back seat. These were typical Americans in shades of white. Do people still bring their families on driving trips to Mexico? And where the fuck were

they headed at night? It reminded me of a letter to the State Department during the Iraq war. A guy was asking about Iraqi tourist spots for a family vacation.

We filled up with what they had, regular. How would the Caddy do with low octane? I drove around looking for somewhere to hide the car but every spot was visible from the road. I parked in front of the office and we went in. The place is much better than you'd expect on this stretch of road, with plantings and bushes inside, a restaurant, and large concrete ponds along the front of the rooms. A clean, well-lit place, in the midst of desolation, with something between spotty and nonexistent phone service. Another plus for fugitives.

"This place looks expensive," said Tara.

"Not so bad, about the same as a Comfort Inn."

I rented a room using cash and my Canadian passport. The desk clerk asked for Tara's passport. I told him it was in the car. I'd get it later. We got our bags and the guitar from the car and went to our room. The rooms were as I remembered, tile floors, a big comfortable bed, with a hand-carved headboard, and wall colors in earth pastels.

At the restaurant, I left Tara to order for us while I took the car to the abandoned Pemex station across the highway. I thought I might find some travelers sleeping on the concrete dock behind the station and I was right. Though it wasn't cold, two men had built a small fire and were sitting, talking. I parked the car in one of the lube bays and approached them, greeting them from a distance. They seemed wary but not unnecessarily so. I told them I couldn't park in front of the hotel. I had to keep my car here for the night. Knowing the culture in Mexico, it was no surprise to me when neither asked why? I offered to pay something if they watched the car while I slept. I locked the car and walked back to the hotel, thinking how much I love this country, the culture and the people. Much went unspoken. Most Mexicans could be relied on. From what I could see, these two guys would be there in the morning when we came for the car. If they looked acceptable and they were going south, they'd have a ride.

Tara had ordered dinner and we had the dining room to ourselves.

“Not many tourists,” she said.

“Not this time of year.”

“I’m not talking about the time of year. I’m talking about the place. Except for this hotel, which is run down, I can’t imagine why anyone would stop here.” Which made me laugh.

“Aren’t you the same girl who was traveling to New Orleans on sixty dollars?”

“You have me mistaken for someone else,” she said, with a palpable self-assurance. I thought about the Chinese. They want our business and technology, but only long enough to learn it for themselves—in the end rendering us obsolete. I felt a tightness in my chest and looked away. Losing Tara would knock me down hard. This intensity of feelings seemed absurd given the short time we’d been together. Then again, how many relationships can look back on what we’ve shared?

Our waiter, a round-faced young man, groomed, manicured, crisp and clean, wearing one of those white shirts Mexican waiters are famous for, not tucked into the pants, with embroidery (maybe it’s called stitching) down both sides of the front and bottom hem and tiny buttons at the hips with no discernible function, approached our table.

“You want this, Señor?” he asked in English, holding out yesterday’s *New York Times*. I lit up, taking the *Times* like I’d been offered a Gauguin painting. Tara and I divided it up.

“Where would someone get this?” she asked.

“I’m wondering? San Diego, but they’d have to have driven here yesterday.”

No matter how much time I spend with the editorials and opinions, I usually go to sports first. The lead article caught my eye. Lolo Jones, the hurdler, had made the olympic team again after her tragic loss at Beijing where she caught a toe on the second to last hurdle. In this piece they took Lolo apart, suggesting she was to track and field, what Anna Kournikova was to tennis. The same Lolo

who had been one toe away from gold at Beijing. Who still holds American records. It reminded me of rock and roll's early years when the *Times* had ridiculed the genre, assisted by the *great hater* of rock and roll, Steve Allen, who paraded Elvis in a tuxedo without a guitar, to sing "Hound Dog" to a Basset Hound.

If you're *The King* or if you're a beautiful athlete named *Lolo*, you're going to be attacked by bow-tied, passionless morons at the *Times*. It's a mathematical certainty.

I turned to the opinion section and read a piece by Bill Keller about a government official who leaked information to the press: "The *Times* has owned up to—and, we pray, learned from—the things we got wrong. But this is a good time to look a little harder at the journalists who got it right. How did they come up with the evidence to refute the version embraced by the president, by most officials in both parties and by a lot of the mainstream media? They got it from government officials with access to classified information, who risked their jobs to confide the truth to journalists. Critics call these "leaks," although such stories hardly ever spill out unbidden; they are painstakingly assembled by teasing out bits of information, triangulating, correcting, testing, confirming. I'd call them a public service. Washington is currently going a little nuts on the subject of leaks. The Obama administration, which has, without really setting out to do so, already surpassed all previous administrations in its prosecution of leakers, has begun new investigations into disclosures by the *Times*, *Newsweek*, *The Associated Press*, and others. Congress has mandated surveillance systems, making it easier to identify leakers and to prevent unauthorized downloads of classified material."

I must have grunted because Tara looked at me questioningly. Before I could tell her what I'd read, Emile (his name badge) rolled out a cart with our food: snapper, salad, and fried potatoes, with the dependable, welcome stack of corn tortillas, served in lidded stainless steel, with rice and beans. A second waiter arrived with a chilled bottled of white California wine in a stainless bucket of ice. Tara smiled at me. Was it to do with the two glass rule? Maybe she liked spending my money? Since the good food with

Nancy and Vern, we'd only had desolation snacks on Baja's worst road.

"Obama's a *formist!*" I said, with some certainty. Tara lifted her chewing jaw in a question. I read her the two paragraphs from the *Times*. "It's getting to be commonplace for him to sign an odious law, or executive order. Like the article says, the great transparent Obama regime is now after leakers, even leakers revealing things the public ought to know. Then they tighten the screws on the media and it doesn't matter if the media's done it's due diligence. What concerns me more is the young people who aren't getting it. My youngest came to me a few weeks ago, sounding off about how all financial transactions will soon be done on cellphones. I explained to him the downside, the government having access to and gathering data about everything we do, like a tracker on your car. I talked about the founders and their concern for the rights of privacy. Sounding a wee bit like Swamis, he said privacy was more important back then. Young people are more open now. If everything were set up and controlled by Apple, we wouldn't have these problems.

'Dad, I don't mean to insult you but you think the way you do because technology has left you behind. Soon everyone your age will be gone.' I remember thinking: *Do I have to listen to this?* I did raise him to question authority, which often conflicts with honoring elders, so I didn't react. The kid's smart but he's also an all-knowing seventeen-year-old. What do I expect?

'Son,' I said. 'there may be things I don't see because of my age but your lack of experience keeps you from seeing other things.' He nodded reluctant assent, with some cynicism.

'I know you think Apple is the greatest company ever and because of you, I use their products. There's nothing Samsung could do to pull me away from my iPhone. But can you see that without the great tyrant and arbiter of style, Steve Jobs, Apple may become mediocre?'

'I do see that,' he said. 'It would be a drag.'

'That could open the door for someone else to do something better.' I said.

‘Better than Apple?’ he asked.

‘Possibly. Our country’s been the standard for innovation for most of its history. In 1928, Henry Ford brought out the Model A. It was revolutionary, so revolutionary that some rich Americans bought new 27 Model T’s because they didn’t want to make the switch. Ford had already developed the assembly line to bring down costs and was paying his workers enough to buy his cars. Keeping an eye on costs, he would do things like buy transmissions from the company with the low bid, but only if the shipping boxes were made of a certain species of wood, cut to certain specs, with holes drilled in them where indicated. The boxes, once disassembled, became the floorboards.’

‘Alex, it’s not the same,’ he said. ‘Apple is technology and the stuff you’re talking about is mechanical.’

‘That’s half right,’ I said. ‘Technology is the application of scientific knowledge to something practical, whether it be virtual or mechanical, but the machinery and equipment is also technology. And I’m not Alex to you, not now—not ever!’

‘Dad, it’s all changing and much of your reality will go with it!’

‘I know it will but you’re thinking my views are fixed. That I have an experience bias.’

‘You definitely do!’ he said.

‘There may be some of that, but I’ve adapted as much as anyone you know and my bias doesn’t diminish the fact that Colt, Winchester, Fender, Gibson, Ford, Chevrolet, and the Dodge Slant 6, like Apple, were each able to tap into perfection. Those companies changed life as we know it. Just because you weren’t there to experience it, doesn’t make history go away.’”

“Quite a talk,” said Tara, “but you’re not eating.” I stopped talking and ate. I can’t help it. I like talking as much as eating. After a few minutes, I apologized for going on.

“No way,” she said. “It’s interesting. How did you guys conclude?”

“It went well. I told my son how gratifying it was for me, as his father, to watch him become a successful businessman. How it

gave me pride, that in his work he was obsessed with *quality*. I agreed that his hero, Steve Jobs, was a genius.”

“You really think that?” she asked.

“I do. In terms of innovation and style, he’s the measure. But he was also a tyrant. Too much of the *formist* mentality in Steve. But Apple, without him, may turn out to be like Ford, the iPhone the next Taurus Wagon. The morning after our talk there was a power outage, and I pointed out to him that though I couldn’t work on my computer I could mow the lawn, and, my old Dodge 225, Slant-Six engine, while not a BMW, had no computers, and could go for a quarter of a million miles with decent gas mileage. A stylish little Dart two-door for \$1700. He said they probably were great for the time, but soon everyone who had those cars would be gone, and he’d be doing everything with his phone.”

15

"Behind an abandoned Pemex gas station, I found my Mexican refugees. We're all *Homeland Refugees*." Alex Westbend

The same guy who had staffed the desk the night before was on duty at nine in the morning. He motioned me over, craning his neck to look outside.

“Buenos Dias, Señor. There were two men here, *gringos*, looking for an American, Alex Westbend. I told them there was no American here last night.”

“But you knew the name?”

“I only knew of a Canadian. Also, I did not like them.” I started towards the door then came back.

“How long ago?”

“Maybe fifteen minutes. Heading north!”

I walked behind cars and the gas pump where I could see the highway in both directions before crossing. Behind the abandoned Pemex I found my guys. They looked different in the daylight, probably a father and son.

“Buenos Dias!” I said. “Los hombres hicieron preguntas en la noche, o esta mañana?” I asked, in my busted Spanish.

“No, nadie.” No one had come around asking questions.

I asked where they were headed. They were going south but they didn’t ask for a ride. They were heading for Tepic, near Guadalajara—a long way. Just one bag between them, a plastic jug of water and two of those mixed fiber blankets. I asked if they’d wait another five minutes and I’d be back.

I didn’t mention to Tara that two guys had been looking for me. They were headed north and we were headed south.

“Tara, the two men I asked to watch the car are a father and son heading south. I’m inclined to give them a ride, so give them a look and see what you think.” We took our bags and guitar out through the lobby. I handed the clerk twenty dollars. He waved it off repeating he didn’t tell them because he didn’t like them. “Este es por el servicio,” I said, handing him the bill.

I loaded our gear while Tara introduced herself to our watchmen, Javier and his son, Miguel. I looked around the old Pemex station, thinking back a couple of decades, when Carla and I used to stop here. When the lube bay and car wash were in full swing. Why would a state-owned gas station, in the middle of nowhere, on the only north-south road, close?

I let Tara communicate without my help. It looked as if she was doing fine.

“Whadda you think?” I asked her.

“I like them. Let’s give them a ride, but they haven’t eaten so let’s take them to breakfast.”

“You payin?”

“No, but you will.”

I backed the car out and drove across to the hotel looking for a place to park, out of sight. Then I had one of those moments when I just didn’t care and parked out front.

They were at the table when I came in. I asked Tara to order for everyone because the Mexicans would order as if they were paying. We talked about their time up north. They had been in the United States for almost a year, brought in by an expensive *coyote*, and it hadn't gone well. Both were block masons. Their first trip north, seven years ago, had brought them home well-off. This time it was all they could do to get back. They were hoping to find work in Tepic. I wondered if they had enough for the bus or for the ferry to the mainland. The problem, when the economy gets bad, isn't so much the Wall Streeters getting richer, it's guys like these guys, who want nothing more than to work.

They told us *migration* had become merciless to illegals. No longer content to send them back south, they now increasingly charged them with crimes. I asked if the workers were committing more crimes because of the lack of work. Javier said there were more crimes but the workers he knew were being charged when they had done nothing more than enter the United States illegally. It was true. I knew about Arizona Sheriff, Joe Arpaio, incarcerating illegals—a bigot with moral outrage on his side. Until the economy crashed, illegals had been deported without the moral outrage. They picked our crops and did the jobs we didn't want. We still don't want those jobs but now they're being blamed for what's happened to our economy.

The road south from Catavina passes through an area of boulders, some massive, several square miles of them. Before Catavina, it's desert that becomes this land of boulders, then back to desert. A geological cairn for Baja, built by the gods, out of boulders the Army Corps of Engineers could neither move nor place. I pointed out one huge mound that guided early travelers.

I wondered how many military checkpoints there would be between here and Cabo San Lucas? One for certain before Guerrero, at the military base, where Baja Norte meets Baja Sur. Another at San Ignacio and yet another at Loreto. If they were looking for us, there'd be no way we'd get through in the Taurus. I don't remem-

ber military checkpoints in my early visits to Baja, except between the two states.

Putting it out of my mind, I sang “Don’t Be Cruel” until I saw the huge Mexican flag in the distance, indicating the state border and the checkpoint. I told everyone to look for a nest, a bald eagle’s nest on top of the flagpole, which had been there the last couple of times I came through.

For a few miles we’d been following a big rig, and it had become obvious the driver was drunk. I started to pass several times but his weaving made it too risky. The last time I’d moved to pass, Tara had given me a *no way* expression.

We all were looking for the nest when I saw the truck wasn’t slowing for the checkpoint. Instead, it began to drift off the road, much to the astonished face of the first soldier we passed. The road through Baja is paved but in many places has no shoulder at all, just a drop-off, sometimes eight inches or more. This was such a place. The right-front wheel of the truck shook the whole rig as it went off the shoulder. Then the left-front followed, forcing the cab into a sharp right turn, a mathematically impossible turn for the trailer to follow. The truck and trailer jack-knifed, rolling the whole rig onto it’s side. That would have been something in itself, if the truck’s speed hadn’t caused the trailer to slide past the cab, taking out most of the checkpoint. Tara looked at me horrified: what is it about us and trucks? (She later told me I’d been smiling). I’d flashed back on Yves Montand, a race driver, in *Grand Prix*, describing to James Garner how he took advantage of crashes. Everyone else slowed and he floored it). Now I floored it and we passed through the checkpoint. I don’t think anyone was aware us. The last soldier, in his machine-gun, sandbag nest, was standing with his arms in the air, in disbelief, without a glance in our direction.

“You’re not going to stop?” asked Tara.

I didn’t answer. It was one of those situations where you expect the whole base to be on you in thirty-seconds but like a firefight that starts a battle, once it begins, all structure devolves into disarray and mayhem commences.

At Guerrero Negro the road splits, the right fork heads into town and the left sweep cuts inland across the peninsula towards San Ignacio. Then on to Santa Rosalia and the Sea of Cortez.

“We’re not stopping?” asked Tara.

“No, there’s not much here.”

The first time we came to Baja, Carla and I had stayed in this desert coastal town, where the main industry is salt. The supermarket smelled like rancid meat and looked like something from the Middle Ages. A house across from our motel had a fence around it made entirely of car hoods stuck in the sand.

“In an hour and a half we’ll be at San Ignacio, a place you’re gonna like!” I said. In the mirror, I could see Miguel had fallen asleep and his dad was beginning to nod off.

“I bet they actually watched our car last night.” I mused out loud.

“Tell me about *your* father?” she asked.

“He’s a tough one for me. Almost everything I depend on comes from him—but it’s fragile. My work ethic, my fears about the Great Depression, my can-do attitude. But my dad’s approval rating with me is no more than fifty percent.”

“How can that be? Those things are good.”

“It’s other stuff. My dad was a boy in industrial England, from a town called Hyde, on the Great Snake Moor.”

“Doesn’t sound like a destination,” she said.

“Worse than that! Hyde’s the place from where we get the madman, *Mr. Hyde*—from *Dr. Jekyll*. My dad’s dad was a boiler-maker, something like a blacksmith, fabricating large pieces of metal, then hammering them together with rivets to make a cylinder. He was conscripted for the First World War, returning home with rheumatoid arthritis he blamed on the dampness in the trenches. In my twenties, I was in Hyde looking for someone who might have known him. I’d been asking around for a couple of days, ready to quit when I chanced into an alehouse and approached an old man at the bar.

“Did you know Alfred Westbend?” I asked him. He thought back through his years.

“Alf? Why do you want to know?”

“I’m his grandson.” He looked me over.

“You’re not!” he said.

“Why not?”

“Because *ee was stiff!*”

I told him I didn’t know that expression so he continued to repeat it, with emphasis. Finally, he offered a description of my grandfather, thick, maybe five-eight, 15 stone (200 pounds). The toughest man in the west of England. Every Friday, after work, he’d fight any man at the bottom of Water Street. I asked him if I looked like my granddad? He laughed.

“No lad, *ee was stiff!*”

“After the war, my grandfather was a broken man.”

“Did you know him?” she asked.

“No, he died from cancer of the tongue before I was born. Smoked a pipe. The family had migrated to Canada when my dad was ten, along with two sisters, his older brother Ollie, and my Grandmother Sophie. From all accounts of the years in Montreal, my grandfather was waiting to die. Our family stepped right out of Tennessee Williams. Well, D.H. Lawrence. My dad had worked in Florida during the depression, sending money home to the family, and like those things best reserved for a novel, on his deathbed, my grandfather said to my father: ‘I have one son, Ollie’, and died. My dad was his namesake, Alfred.”

“You’re making that up!” said Tara.

“I wish I were. My dad never got over it. He grew up in Montreal. He was the jitterbug king (my mom used to say she was the queen. Unfortunately she had no rhythm). He spoke good French, and though he quit school in the fourth grade, he became a navel officer and an engineer during the Second World War.”

“How could he do that?”

“It is what it is!” I said. “The males in my family can do whatever it takes.”

“Like fight drug cartels and get thirty-five year-old women to fall in love with them?” she said.

My reality stopped. “Are you in love with me, Tara?”

“Quit changing the subject,” she said.

“Given his circumstances, my dad was an achiever but I think he payed dearly for it, lacking the self assurance that comes with a formal education. His accomplishments came with a sense of bravado—a ruse for his lack of self-worth. His marriage to my mother, he considered a mistake.”

“Jesus,” said Tara? “Do you consider your marriage a mistake?”

“I don’t. I just think my marriage needs you in it.”

“You really are an idiot!” she said.

“Anyway, for whatever reasons, my father wasn’t a particularly happy man. He could be fun and loving, sometimes taking us kids on shooting and camping trips, but he was also a violent alcoholic. I don’t remember my father ever going to bed sober and I can’t forgive the beatings I experienced as a boy.”

“Have you beaten your kids,” she asked.

“No. And finally I’m safe. They’re bigger than me.”

I pointed out Scammon’s Lagoon where the great whale migration takes place, then the turnoff for the San Francisco cave paintings, the most spectacular on the peninsula. But I didn’t feel comfortable stopping. I thought about the military checkpoint at San Ignacio. I couldn’t remember whether it’s north or south of the town. My bet is north.

“What’s special about San Ignacio,” asked Tara?

“It’s in the high desert, a town in the middle of a small forest of blue palms. The only place in the world they exist. The town is fed by some kind of underground river that surfaces, cold. I’ve jumped into it so I can attest. At night, along the water, there’s thousands of bullfrogs talking it up.”

“It sounds great,” she said.

“It is great, my favorite town in Mexico, but before we get there, one more military checkpoint.” I said, as we slowed to a stop

behind a truck and three cars. "This isn't bad," I said. "I've been here behind dozens of cars with everyone being fingerprinted."

"Have you ever been here when you didn't know if you'd be in handcuffs in the next five minutes?" she asked.

I looked back to our riders.

"Tienes papales?" I asked.

"Si, si," answered Javier, passing the two passports to me. I asked Tara for her passport and to get both of mine from the glove-box. I pocketed the U.S. passport and held on to the Canadian, knowing all that mattered was whether they were looking for us, or for the car. We stopped at the lone sentry, I saw he was a cabo, or corporal, designated by one horizontal bar.

"A donde van?" he asked.

"La Paz, señor. Mis dos amigos van para Mexico."

"Y Ustedes?" he asked, indicating Tara and me.

"Terminamos en La Paz. Tenemos un amigo con un restaurante alli." He looked at the Mexicans then back at us, probably wondering what we were doing together?

"Pasaportes, por favor?" he asked. I handed him the four passports

"Tienes unas baterias? Es muy dificil comprarlas aqui." I was prepared for this.

"Tara, there's a pack of AA batteries in the glove box. Will you get them? I gave them to him.

"Ustedes son amigos?" he said, looking from me to Tara.

"A veces," I said, "es muy dificil ser amigos con mi hija todavia." That's what he wanted to hear! She was my daughter and not always friendly to me.

"Tenga unas buenas vacciones para Ud., Senorita," he said, showing a gold tooth and waving us through.

"Did you understand any of that?"

"Yeah, he wanted something for his time. Maybe me? Do you really have a friend with a restaurant in La Paz?"

It seemed unlikely we'd be driving away from the checkpoint. Why were they looking for us at the hotel in Baja Norte but not

San Ignacio? Maybe they were looking for us at Guerrero and with only one highway we couldn't be farther south?

Driving into town, the camping areas seemed more deserted than I remembered. We passed over a *tope* into the main square, and across from the square, the church.

"That church is beautiful," said Tara.

"It should be. I can't remember how many decades they took to build it."

I was going to park right in front of the church but thought better of it, continuing on through the square to where I knew a small motel with a restaurant across the street owned by the same family. I pulled into the La Posada and found a parking space beyond a large truck where the car couldn't be seen. I went to the office but no one was there. When I came back, Javier and Miguel were getting their things to go.

"A donde van?" I asked.

"Sur, a La Paz. Hay una feria en La Paz."

"They want to go to the ferry at La Paz," I said. "They should stay. We can take them."

I spoke to them in Spanish. Javier did a kind of shrug, knowing their chances of getting a ride south were no better than staying with us. I suggested we stay tonight, enjoy ourselves with a couple of beers and dinner. Both of them looked down as I said it. Quickly I reminded them it would be in exchange for watching the car. I went across to the restaurant to see about rooms. The woman recognized me, reminding me the motel manager lived close by, and could be there in a minute or two. I wasn't back a minute before he arrived. I remembered him. I asked for two rooms, at which our riders objected vehemently, saying they would rather stay with the car. It was obvious they wanted to trade something for the food and the ride, so I agreed. I went in to rent a room, we brought our things inside, closed up the Taurus, and the four of us headed into town for an early dinner on the plaza.

If I lived in Baja, it would be San Ignacio. It's the only place not on the coast I would consider. The town is small and built around a

square where the locals play volleyball and basketball. Across from the square, is the most wondrous church in Baja, and on the square, a few places to eat. Visitors come to see the town and the church, but except for some campers, they don't stay long before heading to the coast. We walked around the square a few times, getting more nods than usual from the locals, probably because of Javier and Miguel.

On our last swing around we crossed over to the church. I don't know how many times I've been here but I have pictures of my stepson, who's now thirty-six, as a small child, sitting by the massive doors. And another photo of a small boy who is now my seventeen year-old.

Each time I pass through those doors, I'm in awe. The walls are thick, the floors are stone, and the ceiling is high. I remember Stephen J. Gould, the Harvard paleontologist writing on cathedrals—how they're often taller than they are wide because the width of an cathedral is governed by a limiting mathematical formula. That's the reason early cathedrals have rows of pillars separating the great room from rooms on either side, which are stand alone rooms, adding visually to the the great room.

In this church, towards the alter, is a curiously tiny, elevated pulpit with a winding metal stairway for access. I can imagine the priest ascending those steps two centuries ago. In terms of magnificence, this church, being rustic, built in 1786 out of local volcanic rock, doesn't compare with it's European counterparts. But churches are meant to convey a sense of the sublime. And this one does.

I waited for the three of them outside, reflecting the many times I'd visited the church. I'd been with Carla the first time when she'd been younger than Tara. I began to feel heavy and more than a little guilty. Then I remembered I was standing outside an ancient Catholic church where I was supposed to feel guilty. I conjured up Bill Maher saying something about this *edifice of superstition*, built on the backs of indigenous people. That took care of the Catholicism, then my thoughts moved to Ry Cooder singing about how he didn't intend to get involved with the girl down at the 7-

Eleven, but in the end, he took a 45, right between the eyes. because that's the way the girls are in Texas. I had those thoughts but guilt doesn't work to keep me in line and fear of consequences doesn't do much better.

We crossed the square looking for dinner. There's not much I've committed to memory, except verses from a few thousand songs, the Gettysburg Address, and the last lines from *The Arrangement* by Elia Kazan: "But I do worry sometimes. Is this what all that drama, that great overthrow was for—this simple living and working, this day to day confluence?" What a word to end a novel with—*confluence*! The guy in the book (I can't remember his name—maybe Nick?) and his wife, Florence, are the perfect, golden couple. One day, on his way to work, for no obvious reason, he drives his sports car under an eighteen wheeler to kill himself. He lives, but it all changes. He can no longer do *yoga* or other *new age* occupations with Florence. As half of a *golden couple*. So he hooks up with Gwen, the only woman he's ever known who likes her tits. But Gwen has this big dark side and Florence figures to keep him through couples' therapy. In the end, after sloughing through hell, he's with Gwen. They run a liquor store and live upstairs—in confluence.

We settled on a café with a good view of the square and the church—one that caters to tourists. We took the only unoccupied table out front. The rest of the patrons were Americans, maybe Canadians. The three guys next to us looked to be some kind of sportsmen, middle aged, and big. It's amazing how big Americans have gotten. I don't mean fat. They were obviously interested in Tara—taking surreptitious looks. Easy enough to spot since none of them looked at me. Our host arrived with a flourish and we ordered. In Mexico I stay away from salad. The water they use to wash the lettuce can make you sick. I stick with fish tacos, hot sauce, salsa, fresh juices, beer, corn tortillas, and rice and beans. That's what we ordered: blackened fish tacos, tortillas, rice and beans, with some cold Carta Blancas.

I knew it wouldn't be long before our neighbors invited themselves into our party, so I did it for them.

"You guys from the States?"

"Arizona," said the one nearest me.

"You come down for the fishing?"

"Yeah, we fly down to Loreto every year but this year, Brad here, decides we need to rent a car and see more of the place. This town is supposed to be special but I don't see anything special!"

"What about the church?" asked Tara.

"We didn't go in. I'm not much about churches," he said, with a little corroborating smile for Tara. She would understand.

"Careful guys, I think my girl likes the church!" Which made for confusion. She liked the church but what did 'my girl' refer to? It could be the informal expression of a parent, but then again... .

"How was the drive up?" I asked.

"Boring. We stopped in Santa Rosalia, another boring town."

"How about the drive here from there?"

"Nothing special," he said. Most of his talk was directed at Tara.

"You'll like it better going back," I said. "That road, winding down to the sea through the mountains into Santa Rosalia is spectacular." He didn't say anything. That kept me going.

"Do you guys know that Santa Rosalia is a classic, Mexican working town? If you want to see the real Baja, you can't do better! The best bakery on the peninsula is right downtown." They showed no interest. "If nothing else, the church in the main square has to be one of the most interesting things imaginable."

"Like what?" he asked.

"Like it was built totally out of metal, by Eiffel, who built the Eiffel Tower, in Paris. He built it and shipped it to another Santa Rosalia, in Italy, but the shippers got it wrong and sent it to Mexico. And did the Mexicans send it back? No way! They erected it and there it stands."

I was smiling inward. That might be what happened, then again, maybe the patron was some rich Mexican industrialist.

"What about the prison on the beach coming north. Did you see that?"

Our food arrived. The beers had arrived earlier and except for mine were mostly gone. Making sure that everyone liked the Carta Blancas, I ordered four more.

“The prison was interesting,” said one of the other two. “We were trying to figure how high the walls are and where someone could run if they got out.”

“Did you see the machine gun turrets on the four corners?” I asked. “The guys in the turrets are young, with no qualms about shooting anyone making a break.” The talk about the prison had hit on something these guys were interested in.

“What do you guys do in Arizona?” I asked.

“We’re with the border patrol,” said the one closest to me.

“Administration or field?” I asked.

“Field,” he said, with a touch of pride.

“Interesting question—immigration,” I said, holding back a smile when I saw the expression on Tara’s face! “What do you guys think about a wall, with turrets, spaced just far enough apart that the guy in one turret can see the next—so our whole border’s secure?”

“That’s a good idea,” said another of the guys, “but we could never afford it.”

“You think we can fight two wars for ten years and we can’t afford to build a wall? Wouldn’t it have been better to secure our country instead of invading Iraq?”

“We didn’t ask for 911,” said my neighbor.

“We didn’t, but everyone now knows 911 had nothing to do with Iraq,” I said.

Tara kicked me under the table.

“Cost aside,” I said, “wouldn’t the kind of wall I’m describing be a good thing? Then Sheriff Joe wouldn’t have to make criminals out of poor people looking for a way to make money to send to their families.”

“Mexicans who illegally enter our country are criminals” said the one nearest me. This time he was looking at me.

“Agreed, but we used to just send them back. Now they’re being put in jail.”

“There’s no stopping them. They won’t stop coming!”

“Not true any more,” I said. “Since our economy tanked in 2008, the numbers are less every year. This year, more immigrants went home than came in, like these two gentlemen would work construction and can’t find jobs.”

“Why are they with you?” he asked.

“Because they have no money and they’re trying to make it back to Central Mexico.”

“You’re aiding and abetting criminals,” he said.

“I picked them up in Mexico. I had no idea they’d ever been to the States.” Tara interrupted:

“We’ve been sitting here almost half an hour and we don’t even know your names?” That changed things. Brad was the one who wanted to travel about. Lou was the one who did some of the talking, and the one closest to me was Ryan. She introduced them to Javier and Miguel while conveying I’d been giving these guys a hard time on purpose, she introduced me.

“This is Alex, who at times has a death wish.”

Ryan laughed. “I was wondering if we might help him with that!”

“Except,” said Tara, “he’s one of the best and smartest people you’ll meet. He grew up when people and the political parties back home weren’t at odds like now. When Mexico was a fun place to visit and Mexican workers were welcomed to do the jobs Americans didn’t want. You guys have to admit things are getting bad.” They agreed.

“Is he your father?” asked Ryan, indicating me.

“No, Alex is my lover. The only man I’ve ever loved.”

That did it. Soon, they’d paid their bill and headed for the rental car. They didn’t stop in at the church, choosing instead to head for their spectacular drive down to Santa Rosalia.

I ordered another round of beers, against the wishes of the our guests. I had to ask Tara,

“Did you mean what you said?”

“It got rid of them.”

I searched her face for the truth, deciding the best thing I could do was to believe she meant it. I ate my last fish taco with some rice and beans. I asked Miguel and Javier about the drug cartels where they lived. Before answering, Miguel wanted to know about the three guys. Were they *migra* or *chota*, or both? I asked about *chota*. That was cops. I told him they were *migra* but they could have been both. I wondered about their desire to see more of Baja.

I took the conversation back to Miguel, asking what he thought about the drug cartels. Why they came into being—and how they had changed the lives of ordinary Mexicans. He began sharing a history of his experience. The only time I stopped him was to ask how old he was. Twenty-four. He said it had been happening since before he became a teenager. Not so much at first but more every year. Beginning with the disappearances of many girls in Nuevo Laredo and the realization it couldn't happen without the cops being involved. Then came the drug and turf wars. At first in a few *barrios*—now everywhere.

The talk wasn't without interruptions from Tara needing translation every few sentences with all three of us helping, through English, Spanish, and hand gestures. Javier and Miguel would dialogue back and forth before Miguel offered their combined rendition (if only my youngest and I could do that).

Miguel likened the change to a drug experience—coming on slowly until ultimately pervading one's whole being, culminating in the horrific reality of a badly altered state from which there seemed no way back. Now, in most every *barrio*, the daily life of Mexicans was never separated from survival and hopelessness. People went about their business but the devaluation of human life made mothers constantly anxious for their children and fathers anxious for their children and their children's mothers. Eight years of the Calderon Presidency had made it worse as he fought the beast with money and weapons provided by the United States. Like everywhere I travel, people love America but hate the government. This is the view of the typical Mexican. To hell with the United States!

“Is there a way for a peaceful outcome?” asked Tara.

Without conferring with his father, Miguel said he didn't think so. The greed was too big. The weapons too many. The cartels were now an army and nothing was safe.

"My country is a failed state," said Miguel.

Soon, they said goodnight and headed back to the Taurus.

"He's articulate," said Tara.

"He is. You want to sit for a while before we go back?"

"Yeah, I'm not ready go. This night feels good on my body. Tell me about Carla."

I exhaled long.

"Carla's smart, and funny. She had a dark side, but I don't see it much, anymore. She grew up in the sixties and seventies. Grew up with free love and San Francisco. When we got together, she was more of a risk taker."

"What happened to change that?" she asked.

"Some of what happens to women, with all the responsibility of family. They become more conservative."

"Easy boy, in my experience it doesn't take much to bring out the spirit in women. It's you guys who become the dried up husks."

"I was going to bring that up," I said. "Much of who Carla's become is a consequence of having to deal with me!" Our host came by to ask if we wanted anything else? I hadn't noticed but we were the only ones left in the place, though it wasn't much past ten. I told him I'd like a coffee.

"Are you sure?" asked Tara.

"Can you sleep with coffee?"

"I've only been drinking the stuff for a few months and this will be my first late cup."

"In that case make it two coffees," she said.

I changed the subject.

"After we get our lives worked out, the drinking has to go away for me. I've had more to drink in the past two weeks than in the past two years."

"Why does that sound boring?" she asked.

“It’s because you’re thirty-five and you don’t know you can have just as much fun without it.”

“Tell me what you were saying about Carla.”

“When we got together Carla had a wild side. She’d been out there since she was a young teenager. When we met she was twenty-seven. She had a boyfriend, a musician, who wanted an open relationship. The night after they made the decision, Carla and I met and he was done. I brought a sense of adventure and will, while she brought stability and a grounding I lacked. She was good looking. She still is, and funny. Knew the words to every song and would try most anything back then.”

“This is the same woman who won’t do adventures with you? You think it’s because of the way you’ve been with her?”

“Tough question! It’s like Larry Hosford says in one of his songs, that he’s taking just fifty percent of the blame. Some traits she’s developed are probably a reaction to me. Others are her own.”

“Like what?”

“Since we’ve become more affluent, she likes finer things. She has a strong sense of style and beauty. She enjoys the better places to eat.”

“You don’t like that?”

“I don’t. I have cowboy and biker sensibilities. The best I can do to dress up is a black tee shirt, Levis, cowboy boots, and a sports coat.”

“What about for a wedding or a funeral?”

“I have a good white shirt, a stylish jacket, and a black silk tie. I’m like the guy in the Garth Brooks song—not big on social graces. It’s not just women who critique me about the fine dining. I’ll mention to my friend Rush that I took Carla someplace and he goes off how the food’s mediocre. How it doesn’t compare to where he goes. It’s always like that. He and I go out to breakfast. I spend eight dollars and he spends eighteen, then he wants to split the bill. I’ve stopped doing that. I don’t mind if he likes to go to those places but I’m done sharing a bill for food I didn’t eat. I don’t like an array of courses, each one I have to pay for. I want

fish tacos. I want a menu with just a few things. I think people go out to be pampered because they're not happy in their lives. I don't know for sure and I wouldn't say it to them, unless they won't leave me alone with my choices. A meal that costs \$150 buys a rear, Avon Gripster, which will carry me and my bike, 13,000 miles. If Carla wants to eat at the uptown places she can go with a friend. Those places make me uncomfortable."

"Tell me about affluent. Are you rich?"

"Compared to most around me."

"How did you do that?"

"At first I could have cared less. I spent my life in school studying things that don't make money, and the rest of my time on the road. At some point I wanted property. When I was growing up, my dad talked about the Japanese in Hawaii. How they bought land and never sold it. That's what I did. I seldom bought a house, just bare land and I would build. For twenty or thirty years I built one house or commercial building every year. Sometimes I built for others but mostly I built for myself, most of which I still have as rentals. My dad had this saying, 'make the relative maximum out of the relative minimum'. I used that to guide me, building houses and buying properties without bank loans, doing most of the work myself. Carla and I lived without frills during building projects."

"That sounds like a good life."

"It was a good life. I worked hard. That part was good."

"What was bad?"

"The way I'd grown up, without an ethical base. I'd learned to take chances. Playing too close to the edge."

"You still have that going on?"

"Only with you. No, I'm mostly a straight-up guy. I pay my taxes and my debts, but, if I could steal a million from Exxon Mobil, and they wouldn't know about it... ."

"Make it two million?"

"Okay, two million but it's better if you earn it. Bad money doesn't spend right."

"You make that up?"

“Nah. Charles Blow said it in a *Times* column. At some point I tired of building. The cost of building lots and permits had gone straight up. I had some money, enough to buy a house and I almost did, but I had an unsettled feeling something was wrong with all these people buying and flipping houses—thinking it would go on forever. We had this friend Amir, in the Bay area, who made a lot of money as a day trader. Carla kept asking me why I didn’t do it? Eventually he lost it all. And his family. Meanwhile, my curiosity over what was happening with real estate wouldn’t resolve so I set out to understand the world of money. Not classical economics, but the views of contemporary, liberal and conservative economists. Now, when someone says, that in 2006, no one knew about the housing bubble, I know that person isn’t street wise.”

“You street wise?” asked Tara.

“No, I’m that whiner from the shed in San Luis. In 2001, with the money I had put aside to build, and more I borrowed from friends, I started buying gold, at around \$265 an ounce. Carla wasn’t on board. She doubted my intuitions. My closest friends disparaged me. Some still do. Then I sold a commercial building for three quarters of a million, promised my wife I wouldn’t buy gold but I went and did it.”

“How much did you buy?”

“All I could. The price of gold almost doubled since then to just over \$1700.”

“I understand her feeling. It was impetuous of you to do that, like betting everything on one card.”

“Except that’s gambling Tara and I wasn’t gambling. I was studying. I wasn’t motivated by greed, but by fear. Besides, success trumps doubt.”

“How will you know when to sell?” she asked.

“You can’t really know but I’m more scared for the dollar and real estate now than I was back then. So I’ll go with my gut. When I no longer have the fear, I’ll sell.”

“What’s Carla think now?”

“She’s grateful, but she wants me to live a long time so she doesn’t have to deal with the many voices who would be telling

her to sell, to do something different. Now, she has me to deal with it. She's the queen—I'm the treasurer."

"What if she wants to do something with the money that's different from you?"

"She does that every day and as long as it's not buying houses for the kids, it's not a problem. If she wants to do something big that I don't want to do, we need to split the money."

"Would she do that?"

"I don't think so. She knows I work hard to anticipate what's coming and the kids will get it later anyway. Speaking of kids, my youngest is perpetually broke with two dollars on his debit card. He likes nice things so any extra cash goes for expensive clothes, BMW accessories for his car, and video equipment. The last day I was home, I offered him a hundred-dollar bill to keep in his wallet for emergencies. I told him how *Maverick* (James Garner's character in a 50's TV western) used to keep, I think it was a \$1000 bill pinned to the inside of his shirt pocket. All I wanted from him for \$100 was to use it as a bank. Keep it for emergencies. If he had to spend it, go ahead, but before buying anything he didn't need, replace the hundred in his wallet. That way he'd never be broke."

"What a good idea," she said.

"But he said no. He'd just spend it. He still needs his dad."

It must have been those words that ended our night because Tara went away from me. She was still there but in her own distance. We walked back to the motel. I put my arm around her but she eased away. I did pushups while she got ready for bed. I moved to hold her but she pushed me away with two hands against my chest.

"I told you, I'm no home-wrecker."

16

When it comes to the world of darkness, I'm playing at the kids' end of the pool.

No one was hungry, so by ten we were off to Santa Rosalia. Tara was warm and friendly towards Javier and Miguel, but not so much to me. It's sixty or seventy miles to the sea, the first thirty or so uneventful, through high coastal desert, one ranching town with a bus stop, and *topes*, then the long descent. One time I rode a bicycle over this road on a hot day. That's my memory of the beautiful winding down to the sea. Before entering Santa Rosalia, the rocky coast is dirty industrial, some ancient shoreline factories, warehouses of days gone by, and the inevitable dump, with paper littering the road, blown about from place to place. One thing that hasn't changed is the sea. I think of seas as being somewhere else, but we have one, one of the great ones.

Tara hadn't spoken to me for going on two hours when I pulled into the main square and parked in front of the Eiffel Church. Wanting some time alone with Tara, I turned to Javier, telling him there was a ferry to the mainland from here and they should check it out. We would be here when they got back.

When they'd gone, I pointed with my chin to the church.

"The Eiffel Church." She nodded. I gestured with my chin again.

"Where I left the Canadian couple who kept crashing." That brought a trace of smile.

I got out to sit on a low, shaded wall along the front of the church. Two local kids, maybe ten or eleven years old, asked if I wanted them to watch the car. I told them I did and we talked about living in the town. Every now and then I looked over to Tara, who must have been hot, sitting in the car in the sun. Eventually she got out and came to sit with us, introducing herself to the boys. I made the observation that most people passing in front of the church

crossed themselves. She thought it was a good custom. So did I. The world needs more blessings. At the other end of the church square a guy was making and selling fresh orange juice from a cart. I asked the smaller of the two boys if he liked orange juice. He did but George was too expensive. I asked if he would go order four of them, which he did, pointing to me when George asked who they were for?

“They’ll be hot when Javier and Miguel get back,” she said.

“Two are for the kids. We can get more later.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot, you’re rich.”

“Is there anything about me today that’s socially redeeming?”

“So far? The juice for the kids and taking the time to talk with them.” She paused and thought.

“Maybe the memory of leaving the Canadians without saying goodbye.”

“That’s socially redeeming?”

“No, but it’s funny.”

We finished the juice. It was so good and so cold—with ice. With Tara distant from me, I didn’t much care about getting sick or anything else. I suggested we tour the church.

“When they get back,” she said. “I want that bakery. You’ve made my life so miserable, I’m starving.”

We left our guards with the Taurus and walked up the street to the bakery. I’m not a big fan of Mexican bakeries, having grown up in a German bakery. These are stark compared with what the Europeans bring. But I was hungry. We ended up with a good sized bag of pastries, and just across the street we found a place with outside tables in the shade, with coffee. Another good thing about Mexico—you can order a coffee and eat the pastries you brought. Nobody cares. I wanted a cappuccino but I knew that wouldn’t be happening. The girl came for our orders and I asked about coffee. When she said *cappuccino*, we ordered two.

“I’m not feeling particularly positive right now,” said Tara. “Do you feel positive?” she asked. It was more of a censure than a question, but I thought on it for a couple of minutes while she ate

one pastry, before digging into the bag for a second. The cappuccinos arrived with little barista designs on the foam.

“Yeah, I feel positive. I’d like it if you and I were closer but I can’t control that.”

I changed my thinking about the pastries as I dipped and ate them. The breakfast was perfect.

“Do you like this town? Have you noticed it doesn’t cater much to tourists?”

“I do like it. What’d you call it—a Mexican working town?”

“Let me try to tell you what I’m feeling,” I said. “Did you watch the Sopranos?”

“Some. Not enough to remember much.”

“Well, Tony Soprano had this girlfriend, Svetlana, a one-legged Russian who said, ‘That’s the trouble with you Americans. You expect nothing bad ever to happen. When the rest of the world expects only bad to happen, and they are not disappointed.’ Americans and our blessed lives. The end of that blessedness is on our horizon but we don’t want to face it. We’ve waited too long to fix things. Now we’re going to pay for the greed, for what happened to the middle class, for the *war on drugs*. I remember back to a time, in Nogales, when the border was defined by something called *la linia* (the line), that ran through town. No wall, no fence. It was the same town on both sides of the line: the same parades, the same festivals. That’s the way life used to be. That time in my life, compared to the mess we’re in with the authorities, is, I suppose, irreconcilable. Equally strange is what’s going on between you and me. I don’t know where it’s going but I know it’s taking on a reality of its own, to the point where each time something is said, like I love my son, or he depends on me, you see yourself as a *home-wrecker*.”

We walked back to the plaza to a black Suburban parked next to the Taurus. Along the low wall in front of the church sat our two block masons and on each front fender of our Ford, one of the two kids, guarding the car.

“Any problems amigos?” I asked the boys.

“Nada,” they said in unison.

Both front doors of the Suburban opened and two large men emerged, placing themselves between the Taurus and us.

“You two need to get into our vehicle,” said the driver.

To gain a moment, I said, “I hired these boys to guard the car and I need to pay them.”

“Get into our vehicle now,” he said, flipping open his wallet to show a badge and identification for Homeland Security. I don’t think he intended for me to look closely at it.

“I didn’t see that ID,” I said. “You flashed it faster than I could take it in.” Reluctantly, he opened the wallet again and I took reasonable time to make sure who he was.

“You boys are a long way from home,” I said. “I hope this is important. All this taxpayer money?” He was agitated now. He again ordered us into the vehicle.

“I told you I need to pay these boys,” I said, brushing him with my shoulder as I moved past toward the boys. I was closer now to the rear door of their vehicle but no closer to getting in. I asked the boys if I should give them each a dollar or give one of them five dollars to split with the other. They opted for the five. I gave it to the smaller one and told him to ask George for two more orange juices. I could sense the Suburbanites didn’t speak Spanish, or at least not well.

“Just get in the vehicle and there won’t be any trouble,” said one agent.

“Like I said, you two are a long way from home, and I don’t think you have any jurisdiction here.”

“Get in now!” he commanded.

“Not while I’m alive,” I said, going into my waist pack and finding my Kabar. They both went for weapons as Javier and Miguel joined in, protesting loudly in Spanish. The guns weren’t drawn and neither was my knife. Was this a standoff? But what I hadn’t noticed was the green federal car parked on an uphill across from us, that now came into the plaza, stopping in front of the church. One cop, and he got out. I looked to Tara. This was seri-

ous—armed Americans, plus a Federale, meant they were working together. Still, I wouldn't be getting in the car, nor would I let them take Tara. The Federale pulled his gun, aiming it at my chest. I looked him in the eyes, trying to stay detached. It wasn't as easy as when I'm telling Tara how I'd do it. One of the agents opened the rear door of the Suburban and ordered us in. I shook my head no. The cop said something too rapidly for me to understand, like a B movie line—*get in or die*. I didn't move and the cop raised the level of confrontation, becoming slightly crazed, gripping his pistol with two hands. Somewhere down my psyche, Butch Hancock was singing something about, looking down the barrel, he swore he saw the gates of hell. But I hung in under pressure. It wasn't a hard choice—die in the church square or get in the car with these assholes. Most times, if you can keep from pissing yourself, there only is one choice.

From across the street came a loud and abrupt "Hey", or the Mexican equivalent. It came from from a short, thick Mexican, who for all the world, looked to be the Baja version of James Brown—not remotely good-looking, thick with big lips and midnight curly hair. Everything about him had to do with power. The cop was now looking at him rather than me. One of the two kids guarding our car had crossed the street and was standing next to him. The guy slashed a forefinger across his throat at the Federale, who holstered his gun, got in his car, and left, throwing off our two friends from north of the border, leaving them no idea what their options were?

"I'm not sure," I said to the one closest to me, "but I think you just lost this fight. From the looks of our friend over there, I'd say you need to start shooting or hit the road." They looked to each other, said nothing, got into their vehicle, backed up, and drove farther into Santa Rosalia, along the one-way street, in the opposite direction they wanted to go. Because the town is an uphill dead-end, they had to make two lefts, coming back on the next block, where we could see them heading for the highway. Embarrassing.

I went over to George, paid for the juices, and ordered one more. I brought them back to Javier and Miguel. Though I didn't

look in his direction, I was aware of James Brown standing across the street. I walked back to George and took the third, cold orange juice across the street and handed it to the man. I was feeling strong, having not given into fear, but looking in this man's eyes, I saw raw power. I didn't say anything, but frozen by his eyes, I sensed dread. He said nothing to me, which didn't help. He just stood there. He didn't take the juice. He just stood there. After how long I don't know, a young woman dressed for office work, attractive, in heels, came up and stopped beside us. Still looking at me, he spoke to her in a staccato, from which I caught few words.

In good English, she said, "You will dine with him. We will take your car and we will meet him there. I will go with you." This wasn't like Homeland Security. I didn't know what this was but the invitation was not an option. I handed the juice to her and crossed the street to Tara and our Mexicans.

"I'm not getting who that guy is." she said.

"You guys know who that guy is?" I asked of our riders. They both nodded assent.

"What're they saying yes to?" asked Tara.

"They know who he is.

"Who is he?" she asked Miguel. Miguel looked at me.

"El Jefe."

"The boss," I said. "The boss of the biggest industry around—drugs. The cop's on his payroll. Did you see how fast he left town when this guy said no? There was no argument!" Which caused me to look around for the woman who had translated. She was standing near the entrance to the church sipping on her juice. When we made eye contact she moved to join us.

"When are we supposed to meet him?" I asked.

"Now. He won't be pleased to wait." Tara introduced herself to Linda, then introduced the rest of us. She told Tara he'd only be expecting me but she would be accepted.

"Where will we be going?" I asked.

"I'm surprised," she said. "I thought it would a cafe, but we are going to his home."

"He lives here?" I asked.

“He lives many places. This is one place.”

I told Javier and Miguel what we were doing and we would see them back here when we finished. Javier looked concerned, like he might not see us again.

We got in the car and headed up the one way street towards the residential area. I'd made this drive a long time ago, with Carla, when we'd hit the deer and had to make an insurance claim. The agent lived up a long flight of stairs where Santa Rosalia bumps up against the mountains. At the time, I kept wondering how this obese agent, Sanchez, could make it up and down those stairs. I was surprised when they paid our claim.

Instead of the hills to the South, Linda directed us to the hills on the north edge of town, where we parked. This time it wasn't a flight of stairs, but Mexican, black, ironwork gates. Tall gates and tall stone walls with broken glass set in concrete along the top. Linda called on her cell and promptly, two Mexicans came down. One stayed vigilant while the other unlocked the gate. I was thinking as we passed through, that the gates were the weak link, easy to climb.

Starting up the well laid-out pathway I saw why someone wouldn't want to come over the gate. Back from the path, watching us, were two Dobermans and two Pit Bulls. One of each on either side of the path. One of the Mexicans was obviously top dog, by the way he spoke to the dogs and tossed treats.

Everything that could be done with this winding path had been done. The walkway itself was about four feet wide, made from flat stones set in black concrete. The work had been done by someone who knew what he was doing. The path to the base of the house was more than thirty meters, with beautiful plantings, species I associated with Baja. At the bottom and top of the walkway were wrought iron arches, maybe ten feet high, covered with purple and red flowering vines. The house itself was stucco, grey-brown, with black doors and black window frames. The double doors were maybe ten feet above us, accessed by a switchback concrete path that rose to the landing in two runs. Whoever made the gates had

also made the ironwork that lined the switchbacks. Unlike the old days when Mexican ironwork was spray-painted, these had been powder-coated. No one spoke as we ascended to the landing, where one of the Mexicans used the ornate door knocker. Someone on the roof with a military weapon looked down on us. The door was opened by a man with a sidearm, and we were ushered in.

The house lacked the usual garish colors that are Mexico. I don't say that as a criticism, I love the colors but sometimes lime green and highway-cone orange don't go well together. These were different—subtle. Imagining how interior design and garden decor might dovetail with crack-cocaine, I saw our host coming down the stairs—a stairway that had taken a couple of wood artisans weeks to construct.

We had risen ten feet to the front doors. That meant there was at least at least one floor below us, and from what I had seen outside, there were probably two floors above, plus a flat roof that was most likely a patio. Our host betrayed no social niceties as he walked ahead of us through a great room with a high ceiling cutting into one upstairs floor, then we passed through double glass doors to a large balcony, partially covered, shading a well set table. The patio was stone tile with a subtle iron railing encompassing three sides, maybe thirty feet wide and sixteen feet deep. Big enough to feel spacious. The landscaper, who had done the the pathway, had also been in here. Everything was potted and everything was beautiful.

Our host seated himself at the end of the table having the best view to the interior of the house and told Linda to seat us. Tara sat down to the right of our host while I opted to walk past the table out to the railing and the view. There wasn't much of a view. The tall hills seemed to grow from the bottom of the house. At the southwest corner of the patio, the house was not more than twenty feet from the hills that rose up sparsely vegetated hills, adorned with deer brush and cactus that looked down on the house—a troubling security risk. Tracing the path of the sun, there was one opening between two hills that might provide a small sunset. I knew

better than to push my dalliance to an insurgence, so I took my place at the table.

El Jefe didn't look at me but I knew he'd taken notice. He spoke in that staccato from earlier, addressing his comments to Linda for translation. Unlike the encounter at the square, he wasn't making eye contact with me. He said that in Mexico no one was safe. That included him. Every day, every week, many died. Linda translated after each sentence. He paused whenever the two serving women brought wine, baskets of warm bread and butter, and plates of salad. They looked at no one. He continued, saying he would not trade his danger for the peril of our lives. We had already killed a member of a powerful drug cartel, which was a death sentence, and that same cartel had contracted with our own government to take me out, with the support in the Mexican Federal Police. Tara's face wore a look of sad inevitability. James Brown looked at her troubled face then back to me. And laughed. I asked Linda to ask him if he was laughing because he would soon be dead, or, was he more amused that we might die a more gruesome death before him? Linda didn't want to translate but the silence of the room insisted. Now he locked eyes with me. This was not something he was used to. His malicious death warrant had been handed back to him and he wasn't facile with a retort.

After a few seconds, I smiled, a good-natured smile and he inadvertently smiled back. Like two guys in sinking canoes, in the same crocodile infested waters, both going down, one sinking faster than the other, but sharing the same plight. I introduced myself and Tara. He gave a nod to Tara, who held out her hand and said, "Tara."

He asked me, "What do you intend to do?"

"To die without regret." I said.

"How will you do that?"

"By harming no one I don't have to."

"But already you've killed?"

"No one who wasn't going to kill her, or me," I said, nodding at Tara.

“What does it matter?” he asked with force. “This is war, and in war you have to kill many—some who are enemies—some who are not. Sometimes you don’t know, so you kill them all.”

“Kill them for what? Money and power?” I asked.

“And what are you, some fucking priest?” he said, half rising out of his chair.

“You think priests are the only ones left who care about humanity? I’m much older than you. I remember a Mexico you never knew!” He spoke rapidly to Linda, who got out of her chair and went into the house. Soon she came back to the patio with a young man, who stood by the boss. I recognized him from the shed. *El Jefe* asked him a question in Spanish to which he answered yes, then returned to the house.

“Why did you go back to the shed?” he asked.

“I’m not sure. I was driving, troubled, because something wanted me to go back, so I went back.”

“Those were my men but they mean nothing to you. You would have freed my enemies. You are the most contemptible of men—without nobility—without loyalty.”

“Loyal to what, money and power?” I asked. This made him angry but I didn’t care. “They were men. They were young men. They were suffering and I couldn’t leave them to what I knew was coming. There’s nothing noble about one drug gang killing another. And killing women and children in the process. Mexico is writing a history where the innocent die and parents live in fear for their families, while you profess nobility and loyalty.” He rose abruptly, speaking roughly at Linda. The lunch was over. He would see us safely to Loreto, not after that. He went into the house.

On the way back at the church, Tara wanted to get Javier and Miguel and leave. I vetoed that. We were probably safer in the square than anyplace in Baja. The police wouldn’t bother us. The Americans were gone and the *jefe* was glad to be rid of us. Besides this might be the only chance for Tara to see the church. Our riders had toured the church while we were gone and were grateful we had returned. They’d located the ferry, which would depart tonight

for Guaymas, at eight o'clock. I opened the back so they could get their things. Tara, steeped in her immortality and youth, was writing out addresses with them. I remembered when I was younger, I'd meet people and get their addresses, thinking I'd see them again. I'd been to Tepic once. Would I be there again? It's doubtful. Maybe if Mexico becomes peaceful, but I wasn't counting on it. Before they left, I handed Javier a hundred dollar bill, which he declined. I said it was for all the help but he still wouldn't take it. We all hugged and I forced it into Miguel's hand before they headed towards the harbor. When they were gone, Tara and I toured the church. It felt nothing like the church in San Ignacio. How could it? A prefab metal church. Nonetheless, it's one of the grand things in Baja.

17

Watching Obama's State of the Union, is like watching the Oscars in a year when there are no good movies.

From Santa Rosalia to below Mulege is that portion of the Sea of Cortez called the Bahia Conception, one of the world's beautiful, sheltered bodies of water. With a full tank of gas, and possibly, safe passage for the next two hundred miles, our prospects were good.

"Do you know what day of the week it is?" I asked.

"Sunday," Why do you ask?"

"Because Saturday at the Hotel Serenidad is the pig roast and we missed it."

"How far is it?" she asked.

"We'll be there for dinner.

"Do you remember asking me if there were better ways of making money than the way I did it?"

“I remember,” she said, “but look at the sea—it’s radiant.” The late afternoon sea, now in cloud cover, contained the Bahia, except for strands of slanting sunlight being absorbed by gray clouds along the horizon.

“One legacy from my father was his perspective from the Great Depression: to be conservative with money. Which means I don’t lose money, but in boom cycles I often miss out, because I bet against debt and put my money into hard assets”

“Isn’t that the better way?”

“Yes and no. It worked for me when I was a young man and the dollar was solid, along with the middle class.”

“When was it?”

“Maybe until the beginning of the seventies, when Nixon ended the gold standard.”

“Tell me about that.”

“The dollar was pegged to gold, and dollars could be exchanged for gold. Think of a gold standard as a thrifty father, one that makes you justify your expenses, where wealth is tied to production and gain is a long, slow process. That’s how we looked at it in the 50’s and the 60’s. Few were rich. Most everyone was somewhere in the middle, which leads some economists to link the great prosperity of the last fifty years to having abandoned gold. In one sense they’re right because great wealth over a short period of time, comes from speculation on credit expansion. Let me say it simpler: With gold there was no future’s market to bet on. But without it, the gold window became the betting window, and it’s no wonder that governments don’t prosecute bankers, because governments are the biggest bettors. But crashes are the unavoidable consequence of economic booms, like a ship let loose from its mooring lines, adrift without a captain.”

“You really believe this Alex! I can hear it in your voice.”

I sang a line from a George Harrison song “I Me Mine”.

“Could we go back on the gold standard?” she asked.

“Unless we have the 8200 tons of gold we say we have, and we’re willing to scale things back, we have nothing but our *good faith and credit—a wing and a prayer?* More than likely, we no

longer have gold. Our debt is huge and it's difficult to see paying it down other than by printing trillions more dollars, which will destroy our currency. Besides, there's no political will to get the budget under control. Like somebody said, 'Debts that can't be repaid, won't be repaid.' I think we'll go back to the gold standard, but we'll go kicking and screaming, pulled along by the rest of the world."

Passing under a cell tower, I heard a beep from behind the front passenger seat. I pulled over and off the road. Reaching behind the seat, into the pocket, I fished out both of our cell phones and the car charger. Tara's was completely dead but mine powered up, with a few percent of battery left. It must have been fully charged when someone put it back there? I connected the charger to the cigarette lighter. First I went to texts. There were none. How could that be? Then I went to email. Lots of emails: *New York Times*, a bunch from Carla, and from my youngest. A couple of dozen from friends, but none from Nancy and Vern. I wanted to sit and read all of them right then but it could wait. I drove the couple of miles beyond town and turned into the parking lot of the Hotel Serenidad, and that same black Suburban from the church pulled in behind us. I looked around, assessing our situation, two cabs waiting on fares, one hotel employee taking a smoke break. Out on the tarmac, a couple of pilots were messing with light planes but they were several hundred feet away. The Chevy boxed us in and the two agents got out—handguns drawn—with nobody to see them here!

"Last chance," said the one closest to me. "Get in the car!" I don't know if I was more amused or scared. Scared! If they were to kill me, which seemed unlikely, then what?

"I can't see it guys. Your boss wants two things, me out of the way, and this woman, intact. I can't see you guys shooting her."

"But I will shoot you," he said.

"I don't think so. You'd have to shoot everyone here. From the wide dirt approach came a fast-moving, brown SUV that ran up alongside the Suburban. Two Mexicans jumped out with weapons—automatic weapons. One was the guy from the shed. It was an-

other embarrassing day for the Empire! A shootout with a drug cartel in Baja couldn't be good. Besides, they were outgunned! The guy from the shed spoke to me in English. "You are under our protection." The Mexicans were ready for a fight, which caused the agents to holster their handguns and for the second time today, leave empty-handed. The Mexicans followed.

"Attempted kidnapping's becoming part of our daily routine," said Tara. "Feels good to have some protection."

"It does," I said, remembering it stopped at Loreto, two hours south. I hoped it included Loreto, but the boss could be on the phone right now, trading us to another cartel for some minor consideration. All that was keeping us alive and well was the budget crunch. Had Swamis been able to hire both cartels, we'd be done.

When Carla and I were first starting out, more than thirty years ago, we had several Baja driving adventures, one of which included the Hotel Serenidad. In those days we had no money, so we only stayed here once. I remembered liking the room. Now we had missed the Saturday pig roast. I asked the waitress if there was Wi-Fi here? She said there was but it was spotty. I asked how the pig roast went? Having a special mariachi band from La Paz for Saturday and tonight had brought in a crowd. We were in luck! A band, a pig roast, and most of the visitors would be Mulege, locals and Americans from town, so the hotel wasn't sold out. We rented a room and I went for our bags. Approaching the car I took a good look before opening the back. When I got back to the room, Tara was under the blankets half asleep, resting.

"I'm decimated," she said. "This is too much for a woman. It makes me understand why there aren't women on the front lines. We don't appreciate what drives men. We'd slowly go insane."

"You want to sleep awhile and I'll wake you for dinner?"

"No. It's not your fault I've been so hard on you today. You asked earlier if you'd done anything worthwhile? Come in here with me."

At dinner, a big, gregarious guy, at the next table with his wife and another couple, asked where we were from? "We flew down today, from Tucson," he said. "This is only place I'll fly in Mexico. Most everywhere is dangerous because of the drug cartels, but once you get below Ensenada, it's safe." Tara gave me a wink. "You folks have a plane."

"No, we drove," I said.

"Really? I didn't know people did that anymore?"

"It's our last trip," I said.

The food arrived and this day had worked up an appetite. The beer was cold—just right with the pork. Then the band started up. There's two kinds of Mariachi bands. The first kind I think of as the journeyman band. They walk the streets, setting up at storefronts and restaurants. They can be good, but the itinerant, street-musician life is difficult. It tends to burn them out. But once in a while, you come across a Mariachi band who are true *aficionados* of the genre. Like this band. The leader played a small, six-string guitar, backed by two fiddles, two trumpets, and a large *guitarron*, which functioned as the bass. Everybody sang, and they each had songs on which they soloed. Sometimes two of them sang harmonies. I don't know much about Mariachi music except my dad liked it. He'd sing "Rancho Grande" when he played the guitar. Just when I thought this band couldn't get any better another member showed up with an accordion. The accordion was popular in the States when I was a kid. Now it's pretty much over. In Mexican music, it's vital. The *Texas Tornados* wouldn't have been the same without the Flaco Jimenez accordion, which was as important as Freddy Fender's guitar. Without Mariachis, we wouldn't have *Tex-Mex*—no Los Lobos.

Between songs, the big guy leaned over to me. "Give me country music any time." Most of what the band was playing was fast-paced ranchera. Towards the end of the first set they did "La Bamba", then a second song I recognized. When the band came back from break, they opened with a slow tune. I took Tara's hand and headed to the dance floor, against mild protestations.

"Weren't you wanting to decide if I can dance?"

"But there's no one dancing," she said. Which wasn't quite true because we were dancing.

"There are dancers, we're just the first," I said. It's my experience that the first couple on the floor won't be there long before they're joined. The song ended and the band went into an up tempo, so we stayed. Even the big guy, tired of waiting for country, got out there with his wife.

Later in bed, she asked what I was thinking?

"About a movie and what the critics had to say about it."

"What's the movie?"

"I think it's *The Kids Are All Right*."

"I know that movie," she said. "What about it?"

"I think the movie's a sad reflection on our culture. A lesbian couple with two teenage kids. One mom's a doctor, an exacting tyrant who tries to be nice, but she's tedious. The other mom is vying for the title of *world's worst-dressed, frumpy woman with a hippie influence*. She's easy going, unambitious, scattered—all the fun stuff."

"Thank you Roger Ebert," said Tara. "I think I know what bothers you about it!"

"Please," I said. "Don't hold back on my account!"

"It's the guy that bothers you."

"Yeah. In the movie, he's Paul, a decent guy. He starts out as a sperm donor for the hippie mom, who's Julianne Moore, becomes a good friend, and a good influence on the kids who are troubled by their home life and the despotic mom. Anyway, he and the hippie mom become lovers, and he wants to have the child with her."

"No problem there," she said. "He's simply following his genetic strategy."

"C'mon Tara. The older mom's the problem. Paul and the hippie mom have personalities that work for each other. Besides, he's not acting out a role with her. He's in love with her. He wants her in his life, and not as a sperm donee."

"You're seeing yourself in this, aren't you?"

“Sure! But it’s more than that. The movie rationalizes misery for those who won’t accept society’s norms. When the older mom figures out what’s going on, she goes ballistic! The hippie mom is forgiven but Paul is viewed as subhuman, by everyone—even the kids. Julianne does nothing to support him, even though she shares responsibility for what’s happened.”

“Poor Alex. He’s so misunderstood. Do you ever ask why it happens to you and Paul and not the rest of the world? Do you ever think you might be part of that small group who can’t accept reality, and because of it, you’re going to suffer and make others suffer with you?”

“Are you referring to that small group, more than fifty percent of whom, will end being divorced? Help me out, Tara. When someone makes a movie with creative possibilities, and ends up with the status quo, what’s that say about their vision? The plot gets papered over with tripe for the kids: *marriage is long and hard—sometimes we forget, take the other person for granted*. Life has better possibilities than that!”

“Who’s life Alex? Your life?”

“Why do you say that as a condemnation? Don’t you think my life—our lives—should be two of the ones that count? This thing about going back to the status quo—why is that supported? Why do ninety-five percent of movie critics agree with the ending of the movie? Takes me back to the beginning of the Vietnam War, when I was in high school. Most guys my age went along with the program and went to Nam. In my experience there were only two that didn’t go, one who didn’t open the letter from his draft board, opting to keep moving, and Muhammed Ali, who went to jail. He didn’t have a problem with those Vietcong. Instead, he said something about: *When times get tough, only one man in a thousand (or was it ten thousand) matters*. I know what he meant—like Obama sending 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan. The common wisdom is the generals get the new president into a room where they explain the facts of life. I say fuck that! I’d like to see some generals convince me that in order to make a more orderly departure, we need another 30,000 troops, a surge, to give us time to train the

Afghans to handle the situation after we leave. We lost a thousand kids during the first nine years, now another thousand in the twenty-some months of the surge, during which Afghan soldiers have murdered us with some regularity. Let's ask those generals and Obama to explain the necessity for the surge to the thousand mothers who lost a son or daughter. Better yet—let's see Obama make a case for my vote! I turned to Tara to apologize for getting worked up. She was asleep.

18

“There are no traffic jams along the extra mile.” Roger Staubach—Dallas Cowboys

My dreams took me back to when life was less complicated and the way I'd dealt with my troubled family to set myself apart. When I was twelve, I sent away for a shortwave radio I had to assemble, wrapping the copper coil, so I could pick up powerful stations from Louisiana and Memphis. Then, at night, I could forget my family in the small hours when I tuned into Elvis and the boys over 50,000 watts. One sponsor was Al Pierce Prunes, and with my newspaper route money, I supported my station by sending away for a twenty-five pound bag of pitted-prunes, which I ate while I listened to the music. The songs that meant most to me were the ones that told a story, like Chuck Berry did with “School Day”, or “Maybelline”. Stories about life, at least what I wanted life to be about.

When Tara woke up, she continued her critique of me from the night before. That I had constructed the world the way I wanted it to be—not the way it is.

“As if the world knows much,” I said, “trooping off in a gang, the way they do.”

“Who said that *trooping* thing?”

“DH Lawrence says it through Rupert Birken, when the woman he doesn’t love, Hermione, wants him to come walk with everyone, down to the water.”

“You make my point,” she said. “You say something interesting and it turns out to be a quote from someone else.” She was playing, but it was loaded at the same time. I said to her:

The literal genius of the writer
beyond allusion and illusion
is the accomplishment
to recognize
feelings and events
and to them be accountable
as the otherwise scribe
crafts a world without plot
and so endures a life
of non-sequiturs."

“Who said that?”

“I just made it up.”

“Can you say it again?” I repeated it as best I could.

“Sorry I’m being so hard this morning, but I thought you were being self-conscious last night.”

“There’s some of that.”

“I’m just not feeling so good,” she said. “I think this food, or the drinking, has finally gotten to me.”

Checking out of our room, I suggested she hang out in the courtyard, near the fountain and shaded tables, get something to drink, maybe a little breakfast while I talked with my family. I walked around the grounds looking for bars on my phone. The only place I found a signal was beside the wall out by the car, where I sat and dialed Carla’s cell phone.

She answered—knowing it was me.

“Where are you?”

“The Hotel Serenidad.”

“What—what are you doing there?” She kept on until I told her she’d have to quit talking if she wanted answers. Deciding to tell her as much as I could and still keep the conversation going, I told about the eighteen-wheeler in Arizona, and without holding much back, about the shed and *El Jefe*. She was stunned. She wanted to know what I was going to do?

“Not come home right now. I don’t think that would be a safe thing to do. I have to play this moment by moment.”

“Alex, get out of Mexico. Come back. It can’t be as dangerous as you think.”

“Leaving Mexico may be more dangerous, Carla. Keep in mind it was Homeland Security that hired the cartel.”

“You always think things like that. You don’t know!”

“Carla, I do know it. The Mexicans told me when I offered money to let me go.” She had no answer for that. Instead she went on about how bad it all sounded and I just let her. She was spilling out emotions—some having to do with my being with Tara—and now something far worse. She suggested things, most of which had to do with contacting the authorities for help. It’s a wonderful thing, as Americans, that we’ve been able to rely on our government. Gradually, she accepted there were no apparent fixes for the situation.

“When do you think I’ll see you?” Her voice had now taken on a plaintive tone. I told her I didn’t know but I would keep in touch. Not by phone anymore because it could be traced, but through email to her friends. “That’s not good enough Alex! I can’t live like this!” I told her I’d call as soon as I could. I asked if our youngest was home and he wasn’t. To please give him my love. She didn’t want me to say goodbye. At the courtyard, Tara had decided to have breakfast and I helped her eat it.

Then we were on the road to Loreto. The first stretch runs along the Bahia Conception, a sheltered bay, containing my favorite beaches and campsites, but with Tara not feeling well, the beach was out. After thirty miles, the road turns inland—no more coast until Loreto—it’s stark shoreline and wind, in contrast to the shel-

tered Bahia. Tara closed her eyes and fell asleep and I went back to an earlier thought I'd had, *we're all damaged goods*. I sang the words of a song to myself, about learning more from a three minute record than we ever learned in school. I remembered it as Chuck Berry—a compliment to Springsteen—having his line mistaken for Chuck. Not that Bruce doesn't stand alone, but Chuck came first. Chuck wrote the anthems, and without Chuck and a few others, there's no Bruce.

My mind was unfocused. Maybe all this bullshit with Swamis and the cartels was getting to me. I thought about Steve McQueen and Ali Macgraw in *The Getaway*, where they get a ride into Mexico with Slim Pickins, giving him several times what his pickup is worth and he walks back to the border.

We'd been driving for twenty-five miles, getting close to where the road turns inland. Up ahead on the right were two Mexicans standing beside a brown SUV. I wanted to be wrong, but the closer we came, my doubts evaporated like heat off asphalt. Slowing was enough to wake Tara, who looked mildly startled, but composed herself quickly. Our lives were beginning to feel like what I'd heard about war—long periods of boredom—interrupted by horror and adrenaline. The guy from the shed, the one who spoke English, was out in the road waving us down. Half of me wanted to run at him, but the other half looked at Tara.

“What do you think?”

“Obviously, pull over! These guys are supposed to be helping us.”

“Famous last words!” I muttered, pulling off the road. He walked to the window, nodding his head. I did the correct thing and said, “Buenos Dias, Señor.” He returned the salutation.

“Soon, there is a military checkpoint where they will be waiting for you.”

“Who will be waiting for us?”

“The military and the gringos. You were not stopped at San Ignacio because they thought you were north of Guerrero, but they've located you by your cell phones.”

“Can they still locate the cell phones?” I asked.

“Not today. To locate, the phones have to be working.” I thought about the SIM cards in my wallet.

“How do you know what they know?” I asked, skeptically.

“Because we know,” he replied, evasively. “I can show you a way past the checkpoint if you follow behind me. But after that—nothing.”

“Tell your boss thanks for helping us.”

“If he knew I was talking to you there would be trouble!”

“Then thank you!”

“Thank you,” he gave back. “The road will be bad. Stay close and be careful.” As he turned to go, I had one more question.

“How do you speak English so well?”

“Von’s grocery,” he said with a smile. “Chula Vista, California. Four years!”

I called out to him, “Wolfman Jack. ‘the mighty 1090 over Los Angeles. Chula Vista, California’!” He came back and hi-fived me. “Good luck man,” he said.

We followed them onto a dirt road heading east and trekked behind their dust for maybe a mile, catching glimpses of the military checkpoint off in the distance, to the west. With a rooster tail of dust behind us, even at ten miles an hour, they would be able to see us. Then the road got bad, one stretch turning to sand, where we sunk to the axles and stopped. They backed up to hook a cable, telling me to get out and push. For Tara to drive. Which I did, along with the other Mexican. The wagon came loose but we had to keep pushing. Soon, we were drenched in sweat. My fellow pusher pointed to a soldier in fatigues, with a weapon, coming towards us from the checkpoint. That made me push harder and move faster. Before long the road improved and we were back on the highway south of the checkpoint, the SUV still in front of us. I’d hoped we’d get past the check without being seen so they wouldn’t be looking for us farther south. With the soldier walking out towards us there was no way to know if they’d be waiting for us.

Tara fell back asleep, until maybe fifty miles from Loreto.

“How long was I sleeping?”

“Maybe a half hour.”

“Put some music on,” she said. “Why’d we bother to get this radio?” I went to *songs I like* to hit shuffle when she said, “DJ for me. Play me some you like.”

“Okay, I’ll DJ but no comments. Take it as it comes.”

The road was more straight than curves, so I one-handed a play list into my phone while I drove. The rule about hand-held devices in Mexico: if you’re being pursued through a death warrant from Homeland Security and drug cartels, texting or play-listing while driving is a permissible activity. The list: “Some Broken Hearts Never Mend”, Don Williams, “Amarillo By Morning”, George Strait, “Sugar, Sugar”, Wilson Pickett, “South of the Border”, Willie, “That Lovin You Feelin Again”, Emmylou and Roy, “Here Comes the Night”, Van Morrison (Them), “How Can I Live Without You?”, Trisha Yearwood, and...

After Trisha, she said, “That’s enough. I’m getting tired of driving. Tell me a fun story. Distract me a bit?”

“I was flying into L.A. from Santiago. I’d been riding a motorcycle more than six weeks and wanted to make it home for New Year’s Eve. Which was the next day.”

“What year?” she asked.

“2009. I was shocked by LAX. It doesn’t take more than six weeks to shake loose of civilization, but here I was in a terminal teeming with people. There were no motel vacancies within twenty-five miles, no AMTRAK until the 3rd of January, not even Greyhound. I stopped in at four or five car rental agencies, lugging my gear. There were no cars. I called home, letting them know I was safe but I might be a few days, though I didn’t believe it. Finally I took the National, and some other car-rental bus, just to get away from the airport. The other brand was Alamo. That’s where they dropped me. No cars. National wasn’t far so I hoofed it with all my gear. It didn’t matter. I was off the plane, happy to be back in the States. At National, there was a black guy, thirty-something,

behind the counter. There were no cars and since there was nothing for me to do, I hung around and talked with him between customers. They'd come in with their reservations and pick up their cars. Just like that.

"I was talking about my trip. Most guys are interested to hear something about a ride from the Arctic to Tierra Del Fuego. I told him about my youngest, who, on an expensive phone call from Peru, wanted to talk about music. The conversation went something like, 'Dad, you have more than 400 CD's and half the singers are black. Did you know that?' I told him I did. He went on, 'I was thinking about it, how I like Kobe and A.I. . How most of the music I like is rap. I'm thinking I'm more like a black guy.' I was telling the story with a nonchalance but the guy seemed affronted. I asked what was bothering him? He said he wasn't sure if he liked the idea of a white kid thinking he's a brother.

'Well, don't forget the kid's fourteen. You have kids?'

'Yeah, two boys, ten and fourteen.'

'What if the fourteen year-old came to you and said, 'Dad, I'm checking out white people's music, and I gotta tell you. I'm more like them. I think I'm one of them!' '

'A honky,' he laughed, with that Ray Charles, out-of-control laugh white people wish they had. 'He best not.' He peered into his computer.

'Could you deliver a car to Portland in four days?'

'I could.'

'\$612. Which city you want to go to?'

'Medford, Oregon.'

'Three days—\$346.'

'What if I could get it there in one day?' He peered into the screen. '\$99, this time tomorrow night.'

'I thought you didn't have any cars?'

'We always got a ride for a brother.' Again that damn laugh.

Fifteen minutes later, I was tired but driving a brand new Corolla, thirty-eight miles to the gallon, for \$99. I slipped through L.A., climbed the Grapevine, making it to Buttonwillow on I-5, 100 miles north of Los Angeles. Somehow, I'd stayed at this Motel 6,

in the middle of god knows where, maybe a dozen times. There were two young women behind the counter, one seriously overweight, the other, a trainee, Mexican, a beauty, who belonged on a Dior runway in Westwood.

The big girl asked, ‘Do you remember me, and your promise?’

‘Of course,’ I said, digging into a zippered pouch, coming up with something wrapped in amber tissue. ‘This is *lapiz lazula*, a blue gem from southern Chile. The only place in the world it exists.’ I unwrapped it for her. She couldn’t believe I’d remembered. That I’d brought her something fine. The other girl was looking at me as an older version of what she was hoping for in life.”

“Younger and not married,” said Tara. “I know the feeling.”

Loreto’s an interesting city. Coming in from the highway, what you first see are acres of infrastructure, street lamps, utilities, and roads, but no houses. It’s been that way for decades. I used to think about raising capital and doing a building project here for middle class America who would like a place in Baja.

It’s maybe a mile to the water, slightly downhill. We reached the sea and drove past some nicer hotels across from the beach, then back uptown, where we parked. Part of the town, around the main church, is for pedestrians only, with paving stone streets and small eateries. I was trying to remember this one place that had some kind of fish stew inside a pastry. Rather than sit down and eat, we got some burritos from a to-go counter. We both got the same, burritos with fish, rice, beans, and guacamole.

Walking around and eating was a good idea. We toured the church, which was larger than the Eiffel Church or the church in San Ignacio—beautiful grounds. I told Tara how the Spanish granted the Indians citizenship throughout California until we took over and made them legal to hunt. Under the Spanish, the Indians learned to farm but under the Americans their lands were confiscated and they starved.

Leaving town, the road turns inland then winds it’s way up through the mountains—a beautiful stretch of road. Heading for Ciudad

Insurgentes, the landscape begins to green up from all the organic farms in the region. *Insurgentes*—insurgents, and the next city south is Constitucion. The Mexicans honor the revolution that freed them. With the names of cities they pay homage.

We drove into Constitucion, another working class Mexican city. Unlike Santa Rosalia this one is inland and there's something bleak about it. The sun was low, another three hour drive to La Paz, so when I saw a place I remembered, I pulled in. It was something of a trailer court with a place to eat and a swimming pool. I hadn't been here in more than twenty years. Finding a spot for the car, we went for something to eat. What they had was some kind of meat, rice, and beans with corn tortillas. It didn't look bad. We ate without saying much. It was still early when we got back to the Taurus. Tara was tired but I wasn't ready to sleep. Consciousness would have to be pried from me tonight. From the patio of the restaurant I'd been able to see the car, which meant I could sit there and have a beer. I told her I'd lock the doors and come back down soon.

On my second beer, I said out loud, "two, if it involves love", and I slid into depression. During the whole trip I hadn't been forlorn, even in the shed, but tonight I was empty. Interrupting my thoughts, every few seconds, in the moonlight, were tiny movements on the pool below. I kept wondering what it was? Before heading down to see, I got another cold beer, reminding myself this was the last one.

From the side of the pool I could see him swimming along the sides looking for a way out. Maybe he was a her. What he was, was a Mexican scorpion—only the second one I'd seen. The other one was during my building years. I used to buy tarpaper from Canada because it laid down nice and flat. This one time Ashland Lumber was sold out of the Canadian so I bought a Mexican brand. Unrolling it, I found the limp body of a scorpion. I reached down to brush it away with my hand, then thought better of it, using the wooden end of my hammer, which caused it to spring to life, attacking the intruder. Amazing what life force can do for a form! With the business end of my hammer, I sent it into the next life.

Surveying the pool, I saw the similarity between me and the scorpion. There was no way out. He could swim forever but there was no break in his fate. Even at the steps he was helpless. It was over the instant he fell in. He just didn't know it! He could swim but it would do him no good. If this scorpion swam until morning he could become a danger to some unsuspecting kid. I looked around for something I could use to fish him out. Spotting a leaf rake against the pump house, I tried to fish him out, but he couldn't make up his mind whether to get on the rake or make war with it. Above, the bartender, who had closed up, was watching me and laughing. The scorpion finally gave in and climbed onto the gatherer. While I looking for someplace to put him down, the bartender came up behind me and shook the rake, depositing the scorpion on the apron of the pool, where he stomped him with a loud, "Cabron!"

19

"I'm afraid of flying, but if I have to, give me one of those small Cessna's—I need to feel in control!" Alex Westbend

I was hot and alone but I felt good. Locking the car I went for a shower wondering if there'd be hot water, which there was, from a black polyurethane container on the roof. After a minute or so, the hot water changed to something glacial. Heading back to the car I saw Tara sitting on a lounge chair by the pool. She asked how I was? In the middle of asking, she said I looked better than last night. I pointed to the scorpion. It's mashed body was no more than six feet from her chair.

Soon we were heading for La Paz—130 miles. I put on some music—a female vocalists list, to keep Tara from asking what I was thinking about, which was how I might write about this adven-

ture. The only thing I'd written was poetry and I didn't know how I'd do with descriptive writing. Then there's the great equalizer—dialogue! If I wrote this book, I'd be skewered, especially by women. How many women out there would support the idea of a relationship with a woman thirty-two years younger than the man? If my book were successful I'd be crucified. But it's not my fault. It would have been fine with me if Tara were forty-five or fifty-five—maybe not sixty-five. I didn't choose how old she is—she showed up at Safeway! I take it back. There is this one sixty-five year old woman. What about the guns? The red-staters would support me on the right to *keep and bear* arms, even with my doubts about armed wingnuts at the mall. But most of those guys are moralists, paying lip service to their minister, or their Wall-Mart wives, when the subject is Tara.

“What are you thinking about?” I told her—all of it.

“I can see you at a garden book club giving a talk and fielding questions about guns and bigamy.” She started laughing. “It wouldn't be about the book. It would be about you. You'd be right there, and it would get brutal. If you write, stay away from book signings with women or middled-ages couples! What I really want to know is how you plan to deal with any of it, the Feds, the cartels, Swamis, Carla? Then there's me. How you gonna deal with me? Forget about writing a book, Alex. What's your plan?” It had been a good idea to have her listening to music. Gave me some time before being dragged back into reality.

“Reminds me of the navy,” I said. There they called it the POD—*Plan of the Day*, posted on a wall every morning. Each activity broken down but that doesn't work here because we don't know what's around the next bend. For that we rely on Nate Silver.”

“On who?”

“He's a statistician, a predictor of political events. In 2008 he missed only one state in the presidential election and now, when everyone is forecasting Obama's demise, Nate has him winning, quite handily.”

“What's he saying about our situation?” she asked, with just a hint of sarcasm.

“He lays out what’s important and what’s not important. There’s two things, the *signal* and the *noise*. The noise is all around and it doesn’t help, but the signal does.” The smile on her face disappeared.

“I like that. How do you tell the difference?”

“That’s what I’m wondering? Traveling in Mexico is dangerous. That’s a given, but let’s say statistically a traveller has a four-percent chance of running into trouble. On a bad luck day, maybe its one-hundred percent, but statistically... Our situation is different because of Swamis. We know he payed a cartel to deal with us. Let’s say that raises the risk signal to twenty-five percent, which in a life and death situation is serious. Are we safer the farther south we go?”

“I get it,” said Tara. “For sure we don’t want to factor in the noise, but how do we act, given the signal?”

“That’s our question,” I said. “We look for the signal, disregard the noise, and we need to be ready to change direction with trickery and stealth, as the signal changes.”

“Like how?” she asked.

“For one thing, we disappear. This car goes away. We get to the mainland without a car permit or tourist cards. There’s no record of us. We’re cautious. The longer we go without contact and the farther south we make it the less chance they have of finding us. Like at San Ignacio, they weren’t looking for us because they assumed we were north of Guerrero.”

She jumped in. “Our job is to lower the statistical value of the signal.”

“That’s perfect Tara!”

“Okay, we drop out of sight. But what else can we do to get out front of this?”

“That’s a good way to ask it,” I said. “We have to be smarter than Swamis and come at this from all sides. We have to bring a balance of art and hard science, reflective and systematic thinking. We get a step ahead of him, and stay ahead. We need good luck to stay with us because there’s much we can’t control, but we control the rest.”

We'd made good time, already passing the huge radio tower, which told me we would soon come to the edge of this high plateau from where we could see the coast and La Paz, but first, we had this last military checkpoint.

Tara looked at me, "Did you know this was here?"

"Oh yeah."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"Since I don't know if they spotted us from the military checkpoint at Loreto, there's no way of knowing if they'll be waiting for us. And since I don't know any way to avoid this checkpoint, bringing it up would be noise."

We didn't spend more than five minutes at the checkpoint before winding down to sea level, with La Paz spreading out in front to us. We drove along the waterfront, past the larger hotels and outdoor restaurants. Just before the town began to thin out, along the road for the mainland ferry, we made a right up a steep cobblestone street, parking just off the plaza and the church.

"What are we doing?"

"I think we're going to have dinner at my friend's restaurant but I'm not sure how to explain you?"

"Just tell it like it is," she said, with bravado.

It had been years since I had seen them. We met when Carla and I visited Baja in the winters. They had, of all things in Baja, a natural foods restaurant, where they served no meat, where a *hamburguesa* was a veggie burger. He taught yoga and they practiced under a guru. They were wonderful people—they came to our wedding in Oregon. Then Carla tired of road trips. We had a baby and she never made the trip again. I've been back a couple of times but the friendship's not the same. We made our order and I asked the waitress about Domingo. He was on an errand and would be back soon. Simona, his wife, was with him. I looked around, recollecting the visits, decades ago. Then, like now, Mexican passersby would poke their heads in, wondering about this place, and getting no explanation they could use, they'd move on. Others would

come in for a coke and cigarettes, leaving perplexed. In the early days, Domingo had high hopes for expanding the business and making Baja a more healthy place. People from his yoga practice, plus a few locals had been initiated into a healthier lifestyle but it's a hard sell to Mexicans. Now, the natural foods selection had diminished, and *kama sutra* oils were on prominent display.

When they came in, Domingo fixed on me with his intense eyes, then flashed a smile—a smile colored with the sadness of something that had once been. But his goodness of spirit came through and he and Simona sat down with us. I introduced them to Tara and told them how we got here. Domingo listened intently without asking anything, but Simona grew more perplexed until she could no longer hold back, and asked about Carla. I told her Carla was fine, that she wanted me to help Tara (not exactly the way it is). When I finished, Domingo sat in his thoughts until he spoke in good English.

“Times are changed in Mexico since you came here, Alex. It's a different world now, and coming from a spiritual practice, it's been daunting for me. I used to think the world, through prayer and practice, would come to enlightenment. Now I don't know what to think. Now I see wisdom as personal, though we still have responsibility for one another. You and Tara need to disappear, and I have one idea. I know someone who flies to Los Mochis each week. Tomorrow is his day. I'll call him. I think if you offer money to him, he will take you. That will get you to the mainland, to a small airport. As for the car, maybe I have an idea. If you have the title, you can sell the car to a Mexican. He can take it to the mainland.”

“Do you know someone?” I asked.

“No, but there are many persons each day at the ferry, who for a fee, will take the car across and meet you at the airport.”

At this, Simona gave him a stern look. He met her look.

“Twenty years ago, Alex could have taken the car on the ferry with no problem. Twenty years ago there were no drug cartels. Alex is the same Alex. It's the world that changed.” We agreed to meet back at the restaurant at nine the next morning.

Tara and I walked around the plaza.

“We need to get rid of the car?” she asked.

“Yeah, I was just thinking about that. As nice as it is to have the car, they’re looking for it and we’d get arrested at the ferry. One fax, one call, a week ago, and they’re on the lookout. It doesn’t matter when we come. Whoever delivers the car to the airport will be in trouble.”

“So leave the car here?” she said.

“Yeah, we have to.”

We finished our second loop of the plaza and headed back in the direction of the restaurant. Crossing the street, glancing down the steep hill out across the bay, I caught a few frames of a black suburban with tinted windows heading towards the ferry. I didn’t say anything.

“Where will we stay tonight?” she asked.

“I know a place. It’s for motorcyclists. They let you bring your bikes into the courtyard to keep them safe.”

I thought we were on the right street, then remembered we had to go up a block. This year there were no motorcyclists, hardly any patrons at all.

Once in the room, I told Tara I wanted to take a walk. I asked if she would be okay. She said she could use some time alone. I looked for a place to email home but nothing was open. Besides, it would be better to do emails just before leaving town. I walked back to the car thinking about what we might want to take with us. There was nothing. We each had our bag and the guitar. I looked at the sleeping bags, sleeping pads and the pillows, but decided against them. I took out the tool box, hoping there would be enough tools to take out the radio. There were, and in a few minutes I had it out. Walking away from the car, I doubled back for the sleeping gear. Those bastards can’t have my comfort!

That I had taken the radio from the car, seemed to Tara, possibly the most ridiculous thing she’d ever heard. I let it go—she’s just a kid. I dug through my bag for the stuff sacks I hadn’t sent home. The down bags, stuffed, were a quarter the size, and the pillows compressed nicely on top of our bags, held in place by the handles.

At nine the next morning we left our room. Before crossing to the restaurant, I put a hand on Tara's breastbone so I could look around the corner to the Taurus. It was there, but there was something else. On the steps of the church across the plaza, was a short-haired guy in a dark suit—not a Mexican. We walked back to the hotel where I used the phone to call Domingo. He picked us up within minutes, pulling up close to the curb on the wrong side of the street. We loaded quickly and headed for the airfield keeping away from main streets.

Skirting the main runway and the tower, we came to a stop beside an old plane, in an area of broken down hangers with no doors. After Domingo introduced us to Angel, I told him about the Taurus and the guy at the church. I asked if he wanted the title, to give it to someone. He thought about it and declined. He told us to go with god. We both thanked him and watched him drive away.

Now that we were alone, Angel showed his humanity, demanding \$500 to take us to the mainland. I told him we could take the ferry for a fifth of that. He raised a shoulder and cocked his head, as if to say, *why don't you do that?* I grabbed the guitar and my bag, telling Tara we needed to go. We'd taken only a few steps when he spoke in heavily accented English, "How much you pay?" I told him I wanted to pay \$100 but I would pay \$200 if needed. He asked if that was for each of us? I started to walk again and he agreed to \$200 for both. He said it would be an hour before we could go but he wanted the money now. I told him he could have the money before we took off, when we were in the plane.

There was one bay without a plane, probably the bay where he stored his ancient craft. Nothing there, except oil stains and tire tracks in the dirt. We walked into its shade to sit on our bags.

"Whadda you think of the plane?" she asked.

"It's like Angel. Seedy and untrustworthy."

"But does it look safe to you?"

"No plane looks safe to me. This one looks particularly unsafe. We're lucky it's a short flight."

“Why do you say no plane looks safe?”

“I’ve had bad luck flying. I feel uneasy up there. When I was growing up air travel was dangerous. There used to be this joke that air crashes came in threes. Back then they did.”

“Did you fly?”

“I did. In the Navy I was in one plane with an engine on fire. There were only two engines. Another time, in a 707, a door in front of where I was sitting, came open.”

“How come you didn’t get sucked out?”

“It didn’t open all the way. One side of the door was pivoting open and closed. We were at altitude. Everyone was military—three or four guys got it closed. Then things got worse. We approached McGuire Air Force Base in dense fog, where they tried to land two or three times, each time pulling steeply out of our descent. The last time was the worst. The pilot seriously miscalculated and had to bank the aircraft so the wing missed the control tower. It was a long time ago. So long that I don’t know if what I remember is real or my imagination, but I can see us passing the tower. Through the fog I see the controller’s horrified face.”

“You’re serious?”

“Dead serious! We flew on to D.C., I guess that’s Dulles, where they announced that everyone going to New Jersey or New York was to stay on the plane and go back to McGuire. At the exit door they’d stationed an officer to check our destination orders, but I was getting off that fucking plane. With my huge seabag in one hand and a guitar in the other, he asked to see my orders. Without stopping, I said, ‘My brother has them, he’s right up there, you just checked his orders’. I began chasing two sailors up ahead, calling out to them, ‘Frank, Frank.’ When I caught up to them I ran right on by, down a long tunnel to where I could see the light of America, as I challenged the world record for the 440 yard dash, with a hundred pounds of gear, while taking glances back at a pursuing military cop. I jumped into the back seat of a waiting cab and we took off with me telling the cabbie why they were chasing me just because I didn’t want to get back on that damn plane. He asked

where we were coming from. I told him Spain. He asked how I'd gotten through customs. Customs—I didn't see any customs."

"Is that it with the airplane horror stories?" she asked.

"There's one more. First, let me tell you the end of this one. It's cute. I took a bus to New York City and walked around with all my gear, with ladies of the night beckoning, 'hey sailor boy!'"

"I bet you were cute," she said.

"Stayed at the Y, and the next morning I began hitchhiking to Los Angeles."

"You were out of the Navy?"

"Stay with me a couple of minutes. It wasn't difficult to get rides. It was late 1965. Vietnam was just ramping up and there was a feeling of patriotism towards servicemen. I don't think I waited more than ten minutes, anywhere. I was young, in my dress-blues, my sailor cap, with my seabag. Slam dunk! I had no money. I mean none. Here and there, people would spot me a five or buy me a meal. I was so excited, coming into Orange County and my parents' house. We celebrated by drinking. My younger brother, who had also been in the Navy, was now a biker. He came over on his *chopper*. I'd wondered how things were going for him? He'd recently gotten out of the Navy with an *undesirable* discharge."

"What'd he do?" she asked.

"Enough said, but in the course of drinking, I took the 'V' on my dress-blue jumper, and in an act of finality, ripped it down the middle to take it off. My brother, who was much bigger than me, and my father, who never liked the United States (he'd spent World War 2 in the Canadian Navy), took offense at my action, and beat the crap out of me. I was in the best shape of my life, but you know, two against one. At the end of the fight, I fell backwards over an eight foot sailing dingy from my early teens, hit my head against a masonry wall, and was knocked out."

"This isn't true?" she said.

"Oh yeah! Like I told you, my family was material for DH Lawrence/Tennessee Williams morbidity, with a gloomy English bent. Anyway, a couple of days later I checked into the Long Beach Naval Station for discharge. Sitting in the waiting room,

waiting for my name to be called, I heard, ‘Westbend!’, loud and angry, from an old warrant officer sitting behind a desk across the room. ‘What the fuck are you doing here, Westbend? Your orders are to check into the Brooklyn Navy Yard for discharge.’ I looked at the orders in feigned disbelief, making the case I was supposed to check into the yard nearest my *home of records*. ‘How did you get here from New York?’ he asked, raising his voice about how stupid I was to think the Navy would require me to get across the country on my own. I maintained a pitiable expression until he said, ‘If you think the Navy is going to reimburse you for that trip, you’re out of your mind.’ That meant I was okay. If he only knew that being away from authority for ten days and not having to get back on that plane were all the reimbursement I would ever need!”

“I can’t hear anymore Alex. Just looking at that seedy plane and fat Angel raises my anxiety level.”

We sat in silence, the faint smell of grease becoming stronger, as the sun cooked petrol-dirt in front of the hanger. After what seemed forever she asked me if the last story was really bad.

“No, it’s not so bad.”

“Then tell it.”

“Okay. It was the fall of 86, I flew to Dublin, with Carla, to get two new bikes. It’s the same bike as the one in New Orleans. But the BMW factory closes during August, so we couldn’t pick them up in Dublin. We had to go to Munich and wait until September 1st. Carla got tired of waiting and went home. Finally the bikes were ready. Remind me sometime to tell you what happened at the factory when I picked them up. I drove a van to Frankfurt, to a WardAir 747, bound for Edmonton, then Vancouver. I talked with the woman selling tickets, Ruth, who later introduced me to her husband, who was in charge of baggage. We three went for beers. Ruth was taking the same flight the next morning.

“It had been raining at takeoff and I found myself up against the front bulkhead in the first row of seats. Once we’d leveled out, the pilot came on with an announcement, something like: ‘It’s the policy of WardAir to apprise passengers of developing situations, one of which we’re experiencing at present. The wing flaps will not

return electronically, nor manually, so we are going to attempt two maneuvers—one documented—the other undocumented.’ I twisted around in my seat to find the steward I’d seen earlier. He was maybe six rows back, in his own single seat, talking frantically into his headset. There was no blood in his face!

"I ran through what I could glean from the situation. The flaps, in position for takeoff, are for lift, which in my mind meant they must be down to lift. In the up position they would force the plane down. So if they’re down and the air is lifting the plane we would have to come in at a more acute, downward angle, and at a higher speed to compensate for the lift. I still don’t know if that’s right but the pilot came back on with: ‘The documented procedure we intend to carry out is an upward spiral, during which, we will release 80,000 pounds of fuel. The undocumented procedure we will attempt is a landing at a velocity higher than protocol to compensate for the position of the flaps.’

"An old guy sitting behind me had some kind of seizure or heart attack. While the attendants tried to comfort him, I thought about my position in the plane, against the front bulkhead, below and forward of the pilots. Not good—maybe not good to be in the back, either. If we came in as if we were taking off, the back would be lower. But if we lost control, I’d be the first to know.

"Then we were spiraling upward, dropping fuel, which was uneventful, followed by an announcement that even with the rain in Frankfurt, it was preferable to London, because Frankfurt was the longest runway in Europe. How fast were they thinking of landing this crate?

"When it happened, the approach was fast. I could feel it was fast, but air speed is deceptive. When we lined up with the runway lights, I remembered a bit from “Hot Rod Lincoln”—*the lines in the road looking like dots*. Any speculation about our speed was needless when we touched down because we *hammered down*. The nose seemed elevated, the wingspan too wide for the wheelbase, making for intense instability as the plane leaned hard to port then to starboard. I was sure the wing tips would hit the ground. There was screaming. Later, some passengers who had been farther to the

rear, in window seats, described how we traded runway for grass, then back to pavement, more than once. Finally the plane came to a stop and everyone cheered.”

“Not that bad, Alex? Just before we get into that piece of crap out there—to fly over a sea?”

“Back in the terminal the Germans who’d been spared, were indignant, loud, and demanding. The Canadians were simply happy to be alive. They sent us to hotels and the next morning we flew out of Frankfurt on that same plane.”

“You’re not serious?”

“Yeah, it costs a fortune to keep those things grounded, so they brought in a team of mechanics, and off we went to Toronto. I was quite drunk. There, in vain, I tried to sell the rest of my ticket to Vancouver, had a couple more drinks and flew on. It was more than twenty years until I flew again.

Angel motioned it was time to go and he fired up the single engine in a black cloud of smoke—reminiscent of my 1950 Ford, on full choke.

“Alex, you think it’s okay?”

“No problem. It’s not far and he does it every week.”

We boarded with Tara in the rear seat, which was probably meant for two people, but with the fuselage narrowing behind the front seats, and our bags, plus the guitar, it was cozy back there. I handed Angel \$200 and we taxied onto the dirt runway. About halfway into the takeoff, with the wheels still on the ground, the engine coughed twice, then corrected, and we were airborne, heading out to sea. I don’t know about flight rules in Mexico but we seemed awfully close to the water and we kept that altitude—with me hoping whatever made the engine choke was behind us because it wouldn’t take much to put us *in the drink*. I wondered if he flew at such low altitude because he hadn’t filed a flight plan. Might not matter here. Who was going to look for us anyway?

It couldn’t be more than thirty minutes to the mainland, and after a short while I could see land in the distance. These little aircraft, to me, feel safer, because they’re more under our control. We

could ditch and survive. On the other hand, this plane was garbage compared to a commercial aircraft. I slowed my breathing and watched the water, looking for something alive in it. All that moved were the waves. At one point I reached back and squeezed Tara's hand. She held on.

The mainland was getting closer. It wouldn't be much longer. Then the engine stuttered several times before going into a fit. We lost ten feet with each episode. I pulled my hand loose from Tara and tried to talk to Angel. With each break in the coughing, I made a motion of gaining altitude and he'd shake his head in resistance. I hoped he knew something I didn't. The miss got worse about a thousand yards from shore. We were sixty feet off the water, with me trying like hell to remember the word for *wet*. If we could reach the shoreline and line up with the beach, I thought we might make a landing on the wet sand. The closer we came the faster we descended, to where we were no more than ten feet off the water. Angel put us into a stall and came down hard on the wet sand, with me yelling at Tara to protect her head. The plane bounced once, and came down a second time in deep, dry sand, where the wheels stuck fast, causing the nose to dip and the tail to rise, as if in slow motion, to an inconceivable din, as the prop busted loose, the engine howled and we flipped forward—belly up, like in *Charley Varrick* when Walter Matthau purposely flips a plane. In the same instant, I thought about fire and moved quickly to get out. Unbuckling my seat belt, while propping myself so as to not fall upward. I got my door open and worked myself out to where I could see Tara. She looked dazed.

“You all right?”

“Oh, just dandy,” she said, as I moved my seat forward so she could scramble past me to the sand. I passed the bags and the guitar, then I crawled out, taking a few seconds to adjust myself to gravity before going around and opening the pilot's door to see about getting Angel's bulk to the sand. We pulled him out and dragged him away from the wreck.

“He's not breathing Alex.” I felt for a pulse in his neck—there was none. His forehead was an ugly, purplish lump, and the unnat-

ural position of his head to his body made me think his neck was broken.

“Was he wearing a seat belt?” she asked.

“I didn’t undo it to get him out.”

I picked up the guitar and the heavier of the two bags and headed towards the highway. We’d gone but a few steps before I doubled back to Angel, reached into his right, front pocket for my \$200 and walked back to Tara.

“Asshole,” she said.

20

Love is wanting to buy her diamonds and underwear, but first you need to keep her alive.

We walked across fields to a two lane road connecting the ferry landing at Topolobampo with Los Mochis. There was no traffic so we kept walking east. After maybe half a mile, with both my hands aching from the guitar case and my heavy bag, I saw police lights coming towards us, followed by the sound of a siren. Two cops in the car. They slowed as they passed. I waved.

“Why did you do that?” she asked.

“A wave means we’ve nothing to fear, but now I’m worried. When they get done with the plane and the body, they might wonder if we came in on the plane. Somebody may have seen us. Thank god there’s a ferry. Without it we’d have no excuse for being here!” For the next fifteen minutes there were no cars going in our direction until a ratty pickup came from behind. I pulled \$20 out of my pocket and asked Tara to put her hands up in prayer and do beseeching motions.

“What the fuck are beseeching motions?” she asked. They pulled over, waved off the twenty, and we piled in the back.

We sat with our backs against the cab, hoping to not see anything gaining on us before we reached town. When we came to 15, the north-south route on the western Mexico coast, they let us out. I told them we needed to buy a car, but they just raised their hands in *Quien sabe?* (Who knows?). To the south I could see the toll booth for the highway.

“Let’s go up there,” she said. “Everybody has to stop, it will be easy to get a ride.”

“Let’s try here for a bit. We can use the twenty and prayer again.”

The third car, a beaten sedan, driven by a couple, stopped. They had no qualms about taking the money. We loaded our things into the trunk and got into the back seat.

“You notice it’s the poor people who pick us up?” she said.

“Like we did with Javier and Miguel,” I said.

“That’s not quite what I was thinking.”

The couple were returning home to Culiacan, about 125 miles south. Twenty dollars paid the tolls. During the last half hour, I told them we needed a car. Did they know anyone selling one? Entering the city, we came to an old housing project where we pulled into a large parking lot. We waited with the woman while the man went to find someone, returning with a diminutive, disheveled man, who introduced himself as Marco—Marco with a car for sale. We walked across the lot, past some Hondas and Toyotas to an early or mid-fifties Jeep wagon. The body had the usual bumps and scrapes, worse for wear from fifty years in the Sonoran sun, which had baked away any luster it once had. I glanced over to Tara and that was all she needed to convulse in laughter. She made no sound—just doubled over shaking and turned away. I explained she had the *turistas* from some bad food. I looked the wagon over while Tara walked around the lot. The Jeep was a four-cylinder, three-speed on the column, two-wheel drive, with windshields, hinged at the top so the bottom could open out like on a Model A Ford. The windshield wipers were manual, operated by a knob on the dash that moved the wipers back and forth. I checked the oil, black and gummy, but full. Someone had converted it from 6 volt to 12 volt.

While Marco went for jumper cables and the keys, I walked over to Tara. She could hardly look at me.

“Your not thinking of buying that? Please tell me you’re not thinking of buying that?”

“It might not be that bad,” I said, trying to remain serious. “If it gets us through Mexico, that’s enough.”

They jump-started it, causing a cloud of smoke that shamed Angel’s plane. That was more than enough for Tara, and she lost it again. I focused on the Jeep. After it ran for a spell the smoke cleared and it settled down. I got in with the owner and drove it around the lot, testing all three speeds, and reverse. I showed Tara how the windshield wipers worked and asked her to see if she could make the windshields swing out while I dickered on the price. He wanted \$500, not knowing this was a classic that would fetch a couple of grand back home. I told him I’d pay \$300. He shook his head no—with resolve. I walked around the truck pointing out the tires that were cracked and old. He nodded agreement.

I asked about tires. He hemmed and hawed, finally pointing to a rusted out Mercury across the lot with red wheels and good tires—the only thing on the car worth having. I asked who owned it and three guys who had gotten involved in the negotiation lifted their hands in a *Quien sabe?* It had been parked there for months. No one remembered where it came from. I asked if they had the title? They did not. I made an offer: If they would get new oil, good brand-name oil, and a filter, which I would pay for, and they would change the oil and filter, plus swap out my radio for the one in the Jeep, I would pay \$400. Because labor counts for little in Mexico, and because they didn’t have the title, I could drive a bargain. They agreed to the deal.

While they went for oil with Tara, who went along to get us something to eat, a couple of kids pulled the radio out of the Jeep, and went to work installing mine. I opened the back of the wagon, looking for a jack and a lug wrench. No jack, no spare tire, but there was a large, four-armed lug wrench stashed where the spare was supposed to be. I cautiously approached the Mercury, not wanting to go to jail for theft in Mexico. Even though it had been

here for months, I kept looking around as I broke loose the lug nuts, which had been on the wheels too long to come off voluntarily. Some came loose with a snap, others with a wrenching shriek. For three of them, I had to get the boys to hold the wrench onto the lug while I stood on the arms, parallel with the ground, and rocked my legs back and forth to break them loose. It was hard work and I was sweating before they were all loose. Then I unscrewed each of them, putting them in my back pockets, until I had them all off. I still didn't know if the Mercury bolt pattern would fit the Jeep, but I worked as though it would.

I took a break to eat the burrito Tara had brought for me while our new friends changed the oil and filter. Valvoline 30 weight. That would do. The kids had music coming from the radio. I ate ravenously. Then I checked out the radio—jury rigged, but it worked. The speakers were just all right. I asked Marco to help me with the red wheels. Someone had cut the wheel wells around the back tires—an attempt at Mexican *cool*? My thought was, even without a jack, if we could get the car rocking by pushing side to side, on the rear fenders, we might be able to make the wheels fall off. One good thing about guys: they get this kind of shit—even if they don't speak the same language. Marco and I rocked that baby fro and to, until, with a loud bang, the rear of the car crashed to the asphalt—the red wheels and tires rolling away, with all of us scurrying after them—hysterically. This made for a party mood. We did it again with the front and we went three for four: the front right wheel fell such that it got trapped under the brake drum. But now we were in motion. Six of us picked up the front right of the Mercury, enough to get the wheel from under the brake drum.

I was getting tired but the Mexicans were just getting going. They broke loose and removed the lug nuts on the Jeep, then five of us lifted the car at each wheel, with one kid sliding a stump under the axle. Soon, they had the wheels changed—wheels that fit the bolt pattern! Then, like a Hollywood movie, one of the women came out with the title. She had looked through everything and found it. I asked if one of them was the Ernesto Garcia on the title. They were not. I asked if anyone could sign a good Ernesto Garcia

and we all laughed at that. The title was signed and dated with an authentic Mexican cursive. The mood was joyous as we hugged, shook hands and said goodbye. Tara hesitated.

“Give them the other \$100,” she said.

“I gave them \$400,” I protested.

“That was without the title,” she reminded.

“But it isn’t their title,” I pleaded.

“No, it was Ernesto’s, and now it’s yours. Besides, I like that we can open the windshields, and I get to do the wipers.” Much to everyone’s satisfaction, I counted out another five twenties.

21

“I didn’t want to come. I didn’t want to at all. I hate foreign countries, particularly dirty ones.” Bernice Pritchard *The Wayward Bus* by John Steinbeck

There was one area Homeland Security wouldn’t be able to fault us. We drove American cars. Unlike the Taurus, the Jeep didn’t have air conditioning and it being a warm day, Tara kept adjusting the windshield on her side, allowing in the optimum amount of warm air. She smiled when I looked at her but I knew she preferred technology to this curiosity. So did I, but I at least have a history with, and an attachment to, cars from the 50’s. The Taurus, though we had thought badly of it, cruised nicely at sixty-five. The Jeep cruised not too bad at fifty, maybe fifty-five, if pushed. That meant three hours to Mazatlan.

There was a time when I thought of Mazatlan with exotic reverence. Now it was the place where the Sinaloa and Zeta drug cartels battled ruthlessly for turf! I didn’t mention it to Tara but there’s no more dangerous place in Mexico than here. I stayed to the toll

road, though everything except old trucks passed us. Hopefully, it was safer, and paying the toll made things seem normal.

Tara wondered if the cigarette lighter would charge her phone. It looked about the same as the newer cigarette lighters. She tried it and it worked. I fumbled to plug my phone into the radio so we could listen to music. It also worked, with not quite the fidelity of the Taurus speakers, plus more noise from rattles and the open windshield. We listened to Julie London, “Cry Me a River”, then Merle Haggard doing the same song, followed by Johnny Cash, “Cry, Cry, Cry”, Roy Orbison, “Crying” and songs beginning with the letter C.

“Good move, Alex! With the radio, I mean. Was that Merle Haggard singing *Cry Me a River*?”

“Yeah, I like guys like him and Willie doing standards. I don’t think it gets better than that!”

“Neither do I,” she said, with a freshness that made me think about how few of my friends shared her opinion. To like the standards you had to have grown up with them.

“Do you know that song Tara, either version, Julie London or Merle?”

“I might have heard them,” she said. “but I don’t know them.”

“Then why do you like them?”

“Something doesn’t have to be from your generation for you to like it,” she said, with her double-entendre, irrepressible smile. “It just has to be as good or better than what’s available now.” There was no reply for that. No matter what I parried, her foil would be lethal.

Best laid plans backfire, and what I saw coming up on our left testified. I should have stuck to the old road. I thought the last *Sonora Only* checkpoint requiring tourist cards and an auto permit was back in Sonora. There were two lines of cars. I purposefully pulled into the longest so I’d have a few seconds to tell Tara what I was thinking. This was trouble. Even if we could convince him we’d bought the car farther north in Mexico, we needed tourist cards to travel this far south.

“Car permit!” he growled, in heavily accented English. Tara got the title from the glovebox.

“No, no!” he bellowed, walking over to the next line of vehicles (he was working both lines), where without asking, he reached past the driver to the dashboard, snatching their auto permit with the official looking hologram. He shook it in my face.

“I know, I know,” I said with dejection, changing to Spanish. “Our Ford with the auto permit was stolen in Guaymas, so we bought this car because we have to pick up my wife, her mother (I motioned to Tara, who offered one more beseeching smile), at the airport in Puerto Vallarta.” He gave Tara a carnal look then came back at me with disdain:

“Tourist cards!” he demanded—in a voice even more vexed.

“Robado tambien,” (stolen also). He had us now. Adopting the mien of a despot, with one perfunctory sweep of his arm, he indicated we get out of line and pull over against the office. I pulled forward more than was necessary to buy more time, got out of the car with my back to him, counting out four one hundred dollar bills that I put in my front left pocket and smaller bills I put in my front, right pocket, remembering the *right* amount was in the right pocket. He left us in our own mess for maybe ten minutes, then came over.

“You have to go back for tourist cards,” he said, making another sweeping gesture to the north.

“It’s not possible Señor. It’s a thousand miles. Her plane comes in tomorrow and I have to be there.” He fixed his gaze on me, then said he would talk to his superior. I watched him for the next five minutes, in the side mirror with my back to him. He talked to no one, but looked in my direction a couple of times.

He came back and asked, “Do you have five-hundred American dollars?”

“If you have an ATM,” I said—quite sure he didn’t. He shook his head.

I offered \$100. He said no, explaining he had to share it with the boss. Nodding I understood, I got in the car and started it. He came

quickly to the window with his hand out. I gave him the money from the *right* pocket and drove south.

During our time at the checkpoint it had become dark. I asked Tara if she was game to drive farther.

“It’s cooling off and your miraculous air conditioning’s beginning to work so I’m fine with a little driving. Just get me away from that guy back there. How far do you want to go?”

“Maybe Tepic, better yet San Blas. It’s off the main road—kind of a tourist place. At least it was in my twenties.”

“What were you doing down here?”

“I came to see a guy I knew, Mike. He got busted for pot in Tepic. I hitchhiked down to visit him.”

“To Tepic? He must have been a good friend.”

“Not so much,” I said, trying to summon up the past. “I remember he got a year or two, and I felt for him. I don’t remember much about the trip, but I remember the prison. High walls and turrets. Like our talk with those *gringos* in San Ignacio. That’s where I first heard about teenage boys manning machine guns—hoping someone would try to escape.”

“Did you get in?”

“Yeah, I got in with the Mexican families. I remember being concerned. I had long hair. I wondered if they might keep me there.” Tara chuckled in the dark.

“Sometimes you find humor in things that aren’t funny,” I said. “Where do you find the gall to say that?” she asked through a laugh. I went back to my story:

“The prisoners didn’t get fed. There was a restaurant run by a guy who had butchered his family with a machete.”

“That’s bullshit!” she exclaimed.

“No really, if you didn’t get money from relatives you had to make curios for the tourists. No free food! It’s not what we’re used to Tara, but there was a plus side. The women convicts were only a wall away and they were free to come to the men’s side, which probably made the place bearable.”

"Another reason why you prefer the system down here to back home?"

"In some ways it is better," I said. "For the most part, we're elitists and sexually hung up. If we weren't, why would we create criminal detention where rape and abstinence are the love possibilities?"

Relieved to get off the main road and put some distance between us and our friend at the checkpoint, I made the turn for San Blas and the coast, into an inky night, working my phone in the dark, for songs beginning with the letter D. "Darlington County", followed by a bunch of songs beginning with the word *devil*—Roy Orbison, The Beatles, Mitch Ryder, The Clovers, and Marty Robbins. As usual, I thought this old music would point to the impossible distance between us. She liked it.

If I wasn't certain I'd been to San Blas before, there was little I would recognize now. What I remembered from years back was Dr. King being assassinated while I was here with Wes. We were sick with dysentery and I was beyond caring. We'd spent the night in the back of the car, waking up the next morning, enveloped in a thick cloud of flying, stinging insects. We traded the car for a week's rent of a little house on the beach, with no furniture. It didn't matter—our week was spent near a hole in the floor that was the the toilet. Tara suggested we sleep in the Jeep. I pulled into the first motel.

Until they get knocked on their ass, everybody's got it figured out.

We walked to a little bar and restaurant for breakfast. Inside were tables around an open pit, maybe ten feet across, maybe four feet deep. In the pit were two alligators, four or five feet in length. That brought back memories of my first trip to San Blas—an open air boat ride, driven by a large fan in the rear, along canals teeming with alligators along its banks—the boat occasionally bumping one out of the way.

Across the pit from our table, sitting on the wall, were two burned-out norteamericanos. They must have been up all night because they were wasted, arguing. One, a balding, blond with bloodshot eyes (nothing more appealing than long, dirty hair on a balding head), was challenging his darker compatriot to something.

“What’s the bet?” I asked.

“What’s it to you grandad?” asked baldy.

“Never mind. I just like a good bet.”

“Nashville here,” said the companion, “thinks he can run between those two gators and get out on your side.”

“Nashville’s a fool,” I said, “who knows nothing about alligators. I think he better head back to Hollywood Boulevard where the sharks have no teeth.”

“I think you better shut your mouth, grandpa!”

“Sorry Nash, I’d just like to see you leave here with both legs.”

“Look at them fuckers,” he said. “They haven’t moved an eyelid in hours. “Bob, we got a bet or not?”

“It’s your legs,” said Bob, with a look of tired resignation. I was thinking this might not be Nashville’s first stupid play.

“One minute guys,” I said, pulling Tara out into the sunlit street, heading for the car.

“Some things I don’t need to see,” I said. We got in the Jeep and headed for the road south.

We avoided Tepic, another big city. In a half hour we would intersect Highway 200, which would take us along the coast for twelve or fifteen hundred miles to Guatemala. Three decades ago, a dreamed of vacation, now... .

“Did you think those alligators would get him?” she asked.

“For the first fifty feet an alligator can outrun a man,” I said, “and their tails are so strong they can come out of the water half their length for a pair of legs, dangling from a dock.”

Reaching Highway 200 we turned south. I thought about long stretches of coastal highway without larger cities. How it might be safer. Not totally without larger cities. We had Puerto Vallarta and Acapulco ahead, then mostly rural coast. We took the cutoff for Sayulita and drove into town. Tara looked over at me questioningly. “Sayulita, you’ll love it!”

Trying to remember where Carla and I had gone to pick up keys for a rental, I drove around until I found the place. There was a sign in the window: *back at 2*. We decided to leave the Jeep and get lunch. I put a sleeping bag over our things and locked up. It’s not a big town, you can walk anywhere in five minutes. We picked one of the outdoor cafes downtown. I ordered a margarita.

“Drinking, before lunch, on an empty stomach?” she asked. After two margaritas each, and lunch, we walked down to the beach, past the surfboard rentals and curio stands, past the campgrounds and the private houses, set back in palm trees.

“A three foot rise in sea level and all this is gone,” I said.

“You’re such fun,” she said.

When we got to a place where we were the only beachcombers, I plopped down in the sand, took off my shirt and lay on the hot sand in my shorts. Tara looked around, took off her teeshirt and bra and lay next to me, face down.

“What are we going to do?” she asked.

“We’re going to lay here until we get good and hot then go rent a castle.”

“Then what?” I smiled but said nothing. “C’mon Alex, what’re we going to do? Where we going?”

“Maybe we stay here?” I said, thinking I meant it. “Maybe this is as safe as anywhere?”

“For how long?”

“Dunno, I don’t see any signal about what to do. Maybe we just do nothing. Maybe there’s nothing we can do!”

“Don’t drink anymore Alex. You get fatalistic!”

“Don’t underestimate drinking Tara. The altered state can be creative. Like right now, I don’t care about tomorrow, or the rest of my life. I just want to be that sand under you.”

Another thing two, big margaritas on an empty stomach can do is part a fool from his money. I told the woman at the rental office we needed a place with a driveway. Luckily she hadn’t seen our car. She had something for \$300 a night. I asked if we could see it? She put the sign in the door and drove us to those houses in the palms along the beach, to one with a driveway. The house was a white, plastered Spanish, two bedroom, with a tile patio and roof cover along the beach side. The same red tile was the flooring throughout the inside. She told us we’d have to take it for a week and I balked, saying we would probably be here a week but we wanted to rent two nights at a time, to which she agreed. Back at the office, realizing I had to hang on to our cash, I took out a credit card. Tara asked if I was that drunk? I made a tight smile and handed over the card. On the way to our house, I stopped for a bottle of Tequila, a bag of ice, salt, and a couple of limes. Liquor stores in Mexico are one-stop shopping.

At the house, I fixed two more drinks and we sat on the patio. I played the guitar and sang Jimmy Buffet songs, while the sun lost a bout with gravity, and clouds along the horizon prevailed over loitering light. At some point, I became drunk, walked into the bedroom, fell onto the spread, and went out.

I woke in starts, cold, with an unpleasant taste in my mouth. Tara was snoring gently beside me. I pulled the blankets from un-

der her, over mild protestations. With small noises of aggravation, she tried to unhook her bra through her shirt. I sat her up and undressed her, covering her with the sheet and comforter. I took off my shorts, fluffed my pillow, and got under the sheets, wondering if we would sleep all night, or go out to dinner? I ran my finger between her breasts flaking off a tiny crust of sand. She pushed up against me and kissed me on the mouth.

“Don’t,” I said. “My breath is rancid.”

“Who asked you?”

I’ve made love slow before but never this slow. I didn’t know where I was, or where I stopped and she began—like lovemaking described by a mystic—except I hate mystics. Later, falling back asleep, the tequila and I began a dance, a slow spin that comes before kneeling in prayer in front of the commode. This time the gods were kind and mercifully I fell back asleep.

We were awake before dawn, took a long time waking up, flushed with sleep, inconsequential talk, and hangover jokes, after which we went back to sleep for what may have been hours. Then, we took another long time before heading downtown. We probably looked almost human walking out of our driveway. I suggested we do the beach route.

We had given this day away. It was late afternoon and we hadn’t had breakfast. “Are you hungry?” I asked.

“Maybe for something but I want a regular dinner soon.” When we came to a burrito stand I suggested we get one and share it, which we did passing it back and forth. Walking towards the plaza, we passed a small alcove of a shop where a guy sold pirated DVDs. At the sound of two loud pops that came from inside, we were met with an unconcerned looking guy who came out with a gun in his hand. For a moment his gaze set on us. It seemed he might shoot us, but maybe there were too many eyes on him. Instead, he made a gun with the index finger and thumb of his free hand and shot everyone watching him. “*Cuidado*”, he said, after each shot. Then he walked away.

“Let’s go girl. The cops will be here in a few minutes.” We backtracked to the beach where a few surfers waited outside the break.

“Alex,” she said, taking my face between her two hands, “Everyday is something horrible—every day!”

“I know,” I said, pathetically. “It’s like watching bad previews of coming attractions.”

“What do you mean?” Her eyes showing the fatigue of worry and the tequila.

“Sorry Tara. I don’t know why I said that?” Without saying anything more, we walked back to the plaza and up a flight of stairs.

“What’s up here?” she asked.

“A pool hall.” We entered a large upstairs room surrounded by low walls and columns, open to the outdoors. There were four tables. One was open, which we rented. The place showed the consequence of disrepair, table felt ripped in places, threadbare in others, stained from tipped cervezas. The balls in their plastic tray, each a culmination of countless bounces on the concrete floor. We played a few games. At one point, Tara asked if *that thing* across the room was what she thought it was, where every so often one of the men (there were no women in here) would disappear behind a plastic, shower curtain, reappearing soon after.

“You need to go?” I asked.

“That would probably get some attention in here,” she said.

Going downstairs to the plaza, I asked, “Are you hungry now?” She was. We continued across the plaza towards the place we’d had margaritas and eaten the day before. At one of the stone tables, some young guys were arm-wrestling, with lots of fanfare and put-downs.

“Isn’t that something you’re good at,” she asked with a challenge.

“It’s something I was good at. I stopped before I found out I wasn’t good at it.”

We found a table at the cafe and ordered fish tacos. The waiter was bringing out the plates and setting them down when Tara

pointed across the almost dark plaza. A black Suburban and a black police car had stopped below the pool hall and two men got out of each. Two went upstairs and the other two spread out into the plaza. I kept the waiter at our table, as I wrapped the tacos in napkins and grabbed a bottle of fizzy water from an adjacent table. I gave him twenty for the tacos, hoping the tip would make him forget he saw us. I asked him to get me a beer. As soon as he had his back to us, we quickly walked up the street to our right, crossed the intersection at the corner of the plaza where the street made a steep incline—too steep for San Francisco.

I set a brisk uphill pace. Tara had a hard time keeping up but I didn't slow down. We went on, all the way to the top, to the last set of steep, outdoor steps going up to the right. We took them and climbed the equivalent of five or six flights until we came to some hilltop apartments, on different levels, all in white stucco.

"Have you been here before?" she asked. I told her I had.

The night was warm—almost still. Palms moved in gentle breezes and moonlight along the beach. Far below, the lights of town ended where the stars and the sky began.

23

"If it wasn't for Sam, I'd have missed it, whatever it was?"
Ellen Burstyn *The Last Picture Show*

"If I thought you knew, I'd ask what now?" she said. I didn't know, and I didn't answer, but the night air was a balmy room temperature and we had fish tacos, two each, and a bottle of fizzy water. There was no one to bother us. I remembered that Anna, the cleaning woman, or her daughter, came here only during the day. The three smaller units were occupied but the larger one up top showed no lights. I went up to have a look. From what I could see there

was no luggage or personal belongings. One window, operated by a crank, had been left open just enough for my arm to reach in, and putting up with a minute of stretched forearm muscles, I had it open. I slipped inside and came back out through the door. Meanwhile, Tara had found an outdoor table and chairs overlooking the town below. Because we were close to one of the occupied units, she was talking real low, so I began singing a Don Williams song about *Hank and Tennessee*, not loud, but not in a whisper. I could see Tara's smile in the moonlight. Presently a guy emerged in the doorway.

"How you doin tonight?" I called out.

"Doin fine," he said. "Just wondered who was out here?"

"Just us—Paul and Paula. Stayin in the top place." Tara looked up, surprised to see the light on by the front door.

"Hmm, I asked the concierge today if there were people coming in. She said there weren't."

"The concierge—you talking about old Anna or her daughter?"

"The daughter," he said.

"We drove in late—I know Anna and her daughter. On our way from their house we almost couldn't get here—Federales, maybe Feds, have the road blocked off, coming in. They're all over the plaza."

Tara snickered, grabbing at my hair in the dimness.

She whispered, "You are the worst Chevy Chase imitator in the known world!"

"There was a shooting here today—like a mafia thing," he said. "Some merchant didn't pay up and they killed him. We thought these resort towns were safe. Now I think we're done coming here." By now, his wife was pushing her upper body past him in the doorway.

"You two like a beer?" she asked.

We sat out there, Paul and Paula, with Don and Donna from Los Angeles. They weren't travelers—just vacationers. Fly to Puerto Vallarta and take the shuttle to Sayulita.

"When did it get so bad?" asked Don.

“I’m not sure?” I said. “One night at home, I walked over to Safeway. There was a Mexican woman, an employee, maybe sixty, outside having a smoke break. She petted my dog and I asked if she knew my kids, who go there every night? She works in the back, in the bakery, so she didn’t know them. She’d worked there for more than ten years. She came from Guadalajara, but she doesn’t go back anymore. The last time down, she’d been kidnapped and her family paid \$3000 to get her back. Most families she knew had someone who’d been kidnapped, the last one being her stepdaughter, her current husband’s daughter. They paid the ransom but her kidnappers cut her into pieces before giving her back.”

“We need to go after them,” said Don. “Let the Marines from Camp Pendleton head south and straighten out this whole mess.” A silence hung on the night air.

“Think about it Don,” I said. “How far back do you have to look to find one of our military adventures that worked?”

“Then we should send up drones to kill all these drug dealers!”

“There’ll be more to take their places. As long as there’s demand there’ll be supply. It’s not going to be solved with drones or marines. We have to change what we’re about.”

“And what are we about?” he asked with some frustration towards my dissing his solutions.

“We’re about greedy bankers, We’re about stupid members of congress. We’re about fearful conservatives who think we should spend half of the world’s military budget to *support our troops*.”

“Jesus Christ, listening to you’s a bummer,” said an exasperated Don, which brought an appreciative laugh from Tara—at which Donna jumped in:

“I don’t think so. It needs talked about! I get so sick of meaningless chatter, I might die of boredom! The things you’re bringing up are what we should be talking about. Your daughter has a little laugh at your expense, but she’s got some growing up to do.”

I was loving this, not just because Tara’s sarcasm was met head-on, but because Donna was bored, right on, and good looking. She might have been just on the good side of fifty, interested—plus she

was tan and trim. She wore a simple print dress, showing lots of freckled upper body, arms, and legs. I looked at Tara. She was not happy. I changed the subject:

“So, if Mexico is out, where do we travel? Mexico was my default place, usually safe enough to drive or ride a motorcycle, friendly people and great weather.”

“You ride motorcycles?” asked Donna, enthusiastically.

“Oh, he does,” said Tara. “The Arctic, Central America, South America, around the world.”

“You must be proud to have a dad, who can do those things?” said Donna.

Tara looked over at my smug complacency.

“Oh, he’s not my father,” said Tara. “He was one of fifty guys who answered my ad offering an expense paid vacation to Mexico, to get me pregnant—then get out of my life.”

“How did you choose Paul?” asked Donna.

“He was for sure the most intelligent, good-looking when he was younger, and fun on the phone. I had some concern about a greater probability for down syndrome with an older man—but...”

“Sounds analytical,” said Donna.

“Maybe, but like I said, I didn’t want the guy to be in my life. I’m Tara, by the way, and this is Alex. I didn’t want us to use our real names. Which reminds me, I’m ovulating, so we can’t sit out for long.”

“I understand,” said Donna. “But Alex, I’m intrigued by your question about where we travel if Mexico is out. Let’s exchange email addresses tomorrow. I’d like to hear your thoughts. Since Tara wants you out of her life, I’m sure she won’t object. One last question for you Tara? With you being as beautiful and bright as you are, those other applicants must have given it their all. What was the thing that separated Alex from the rest?”

“I suppose,” she said, “it was that he wouldn’t accept me paying for the trip, for either of us, and he was the only one that I might fall in love with.”

“You’re getting to where you can make up lives with the best of them,” I said, as we climbed the stairs to our room.

“I learned from the master, and if you want to see yet another side of me, exchange email addresses with that bitch tomorrow.”

We looked through our suite, four rooms, a kitchen, a sitting room with a large couch, a bedroom and bathroom.

“Nice,” she said.

“Ought to be,” I said. Cost me \$300.” I looked in the refrigerator. There was one bottle of beer. I twisted the top and suggested we sit out. The beer was cold. I took the first pull and passed it to her.

24

I like you. I won't kill you until the end.

We didn’t want to be found in the room so we woke up early and left. Didn’t take long to get ready. We had no luggage, no toothbrushes. Halfway down the hill we passed Anna walking to work. It had been five years and she looked older. I hoped I didn’t look that much older. I hesitated, then headed over to her. “You know me?” I asked in Spanish. She was hesitant looking from me to Tara, then back to me. She smiled and I hugged her asking about her family. She asked what we were doing here—looking mostly at Tara. I told her we had big trouble with the cops and we spent the night at the apartments. She was perplexed. I told her I was sorry and I wanted to pay. She asked about Carla. “She’s fine, everything’s fine.” She wouldn’t take my money.

We skirted the plaza, heading for the beach at a good pace. Tara pulled on my arm, telling me to slow down—she was nauseous.

"I'm full of stress," she said. "You try to make light of things, but they get to me. Whenever things start looking better, they get worse. And I'm skeptical about what we eat and drink."

We reached the beach and headed towards the rental. Tara sat in the Jeep while I gathered our things. I pulled out of the driveway heading towards town. Almost immediately, a black federal car made a right, coming our way, and passed us. I watched them in the rearview mirror, turning into our driveway. Tara had seen them.

"They don't know the car," she said. "They got the credit card but they don't know the car. They didn't even look at us. Stop here a minute," she said. I pulled over and looked at her curiously?

"That pharmacy—I want something for my stomach."

"I'll go," I said, but she was out of the car. I sat there, maybe two minutes, wondering if I should go help her. She should have let me go—she can't speak the language. A green federal car turned the corner, moving fast towards our beach rental. Two cops. They saw Tara coming out of the shop and braked to a stop. She'd seen them. I slipped out my door, low to the sidewalk, where I'd pulled up on the wrong side of the street. We ran to the corner, turned left and bolted up the stairs to the pool hall. I looked back for who might have seen us. The cops hadn't made the corner and I didn't see anyone else.

Inside there was no one. No players—no proprietor. I leaned out, looking towards the plaza. There was nothing. I ran to the other side where I could see the cop car. It was empty. I went again to the view of the plaza. There they were, with someone pointing to our side of the plaza. Soon I heard them bounding up the stairs and in an act of desperation I pulled Tara through the shower curtain, hiding the commode, only to find the proprietor on the pot, his huge belly hanging out, with a girly magazine and a hard-on. I could hear the cops in the room. Peeling off two twenties, I put a forefinger to my lips and gently pushed him out, fumbling with his pants, in embarrassment. Both cops laughed, which may have served us—aroused men don't like to be laughed at. They talked for a few seconds then I heard the cops head down the stairs. Quickly, I went to the side where they were parked. They were in

the car, lights ablaze, heading towards the plaza. I motioned for our bathroom buddy to come look. As best I could, I told him what we needed. He kept shaking his head no. I counted off bills. When I got to \$80, it was still no. I motioned to Tara that we were going. I gave it one more try—\$100. He took it, pointed to the steel gate and padlock that secured the place, and made a closed padlock motion.

He went for the Jeep and Tara drew back the curtain and went into the commode. Using one hand to lift the seat and the other to flush what was in the bowl, she retched violently. Then she was up and we headed for the stairs. I locked the gate and followed. Standing in the shadows, I surveyed the plaza, then stepped out and opened the back of the wagon. Tara scrambled in and I followed. He drove towards the highway while I covered Tara with her sleeping bag, placing her bag on her legs and her sleeping pad on her upper body. I did the same to myself—the guitar on my chest and head. We reached the connecting road and headed for the highway. No more turns, better for her stomach. Then he slowed. I could hear cars and voices but we didn't stop—they waved us through—guess there's something about a 50's Jeep with Mexican plates. As soon as we were out of sight of the roadblock, he pulled over. He and I got out. He pointed off to the right to a trail back to town. He said the roadblock was *gringos*—big black trucks. More than one, I asked? He nodded yes, rubbing his thumb and finger together, indicating more money. My inclination was to tell him to fuck off. I counted off three more twenties, patted him on the shoulder and thanked him. I told him to go with god!

We turned south to Puerto Vallarta with Tara in the back. As soon as I came to a rural turnoff, I pulled off the road, out of sight. I asked how she was doing? “Not good,” she said. “Not good at all.” I opened my sleeping pad and made a makeshift bed with a pillow and her sleeping bag for a blanket. I was going to stop in Vallarta, but that was less than an hour and she was sleeping. I kept driving. Maybe an hour and a half south, I saw her face watching the road over the seat.

“How is it?” I asked.

“Much better,” she said, convincingly. “Now I’m starving.”

Soon, we came to a turnoff in the direction of the beach, San something? I took it, and a few miles of roughly paved road brought us to an outdoor restaurant, on the beach, where I noticed we were down to an eighth of a tank of gas. The waitress said the nearest Pemex was at the airport, the Playa Del Oro.

When our food arrived, grilled fish, rice, salad, tortillas, and a couple of cervezas, we moved to sit at one of the outside tables, under the palapas. Tara was distant. A low-flying jet, with a Canadian Maple Leaf on the tail, shook the horizon, taking off. I began singing, unconsciously, under my breath.

“What’re you singing?” she asked, absently. I sang a couple of lines of “Wimmin’s got me Swimmin” (in a pool of tears).

“Cute,” she said.

“Larry Hosford,” I offered.

“Alex, this is all too much for me.”

“I know. Sometimes I wonder how much more I can take.”

“You don’t understand. It’s not just what we’re running from. It’s this thing with you and me. I need a break from it.”

I took a pause to let reality shift. This was different—way different. Yesterday, she wanted and needed me in her life. Now, she wanted to be without me. Which made for an emptiness I hadn’t felt in a long time. All that effort I make to stay unattached to outcome. That didn’t include Tara not wanting to be with me.

“I’m not getting this,” I said.

“This was coming Alex, even if we didn’t know it. Like this trip—at some point it ends.”

“How long have you been thinking about this?” I asked, and she came undone. She looked miserable and if possible—unattractive.

“You have to stop Alex! You’re like a child thinking you can sail off the garage roof on homemade wings. I need to wake up and take care of myself!”

“Tara, we’ve had rough times and we’ve worked through them. Let’s slow down and take a break here, get a comfortable place, take it easy.”

“No, Alex! What I need is some place I can go to sort this out on my own, without Feds, without cartels, and without you.”

I picked through my food while she ate every bite. She asked what I was thinking about.

“There’s two kinds of people who live to be old. Good people, and the ones waiting to get even.”

“Which one are you?” she asked.

“Neither, I don’t want to be alive right now.”

“Alex, you have to let go. Let this thing work itself out—give it some time. Don’t you have faith in me? I need some time to work this out.”

“Tara, those are Tracy’s lines from *Manhattan*, when she’s going to London, and Woody Allen runs across town to talk her out of it.”

“I saw the movie,” she said looking out across the ocean. When she looked back at me, her eyes were wet and far away. She wouldn’t be coming back, either.

Then we were in the Jeep, heading for the airport. This was beyond possibility. Could this really be the last day? I had to be careful. I was on the verge of coming undone and I didn’t want to do it in front of her. Instead of falling apart, or facing my feelings, I babbled:

“One time I worked in Southern California at Hiram’s Market, when a supermarket could still be called Hiram’s. Later, Lucky bought them out. This one night after work, I was probably sixteen, my friends and I made a pilgrimage across Orange County to an unprecedented event. A small chain of grocery stores, I think it was Von’s, in Anaheim, were going to keep one of their stores open twenty-four hours. For us, this was a revelatory event—an emerging from the dark ages. Only a few restaurants stayed open all night!” That’s all I said about it. She had no comment so I kept on: “I remember reading something about Reagan when he was president. He’d wear a flight jacket, a cowboy, denim jacket, but never a motorcycle jacket—made me deeply satisfied I’d worn one for years.”

“Remember your poem about the guy who doesn’t pay attention to his feelings,” she said. “How his life becomes a bunch of non-sequiturs? All night markets—Reagan not wearing a motorcycle jacket? Alex, you need to go home and find your life—and I need to go and find mine. You need to become a writer. So much has happened to you. If you can deal with what rolls off your tongue, you’ll be good!” I looked at her in utter disbelief!

“Fuck off, Tara! The last thing I need right now, is advise from you.”

Now I wanted her to go! The few times I looked at her on the drive to the airport, she seemed deeply troubled. I was sure it had to do with uncertainty about her future, and not about leaving me.

“Those friends of yours in Chile—what’s it like there? Do you think I could go there?”

“Stay with them?” I asked.

“Do you think?” she asked. She really had nowhere to go. The U.S. was out, but Punta Arenas, on the Straights of Magellan—almost the end of the world? Stay with Cisco and Katya, at the bottom of the world?

“It’s a good time of year to head there. Winter’s just ending—I can call him.” She said nothing. Somehow I felt a little better giving her to Cisco and Katya. She and Katya are near the same age, and one of Cisco’s friends would become her much younger lover. I pushed that thought away.

Then we were at the airport and I called Cisco. I was surprised he picked up and he was surprised I was calling from Central Mexico. I told him something of the story and asked if Tara could come there? He asked me to send a picture of her. Why the fuck would he need a picture? Using the airport’s WiFi, I sent a picture.

“How old is she?”

“Thirty-five.”

“Thirty-five! Alex, you are a fucking wonder! Of course she can come Only better you come too!”

I told her what he said about my coming too. She repeated her earlier dross about her life and my life. Again, part of me wanted her to go, and as the fates played it out, I got my wish. At the

AeroMexico counter, there was a flight in forty minutes, boarding in twenty minutes, with a change in Mexico City to LAN, to Santiago, a four hour layover, then an Airbus 330 to Punta Arenas, reduced to \$1190, as a last minute flight. Tara handed her passport to the AeroMex clerk. I thought she might come up on a no-fly list. The clerk scanned her passport and asked how she'd be paying. She'd said cash. The clerk told her international flights now required credit or debit cards. Maybe it had to do with terrorism? Maybe to make it easier for guys like Swamis to track girls? I presented my Canadian passport and a BMW credit card that was accepted. Once she had the ticket, Tara began counting out hundreds from the money she'd gotten from Art. "You got to be kidding," I said, refusing them. While Tara used the restroom, I went for her things.

I was back with her Harley bag and guitar, in minutes. We stood there looking at each other. She put her arms around me, tight, to where she hurt my neck.

"Why are you doing this?" I stammered. She took a step back and waved me off! Picking up her bag she turned towards the metal detector.

"Your guitar?" She waved me off again. Only one woman in front of her and she was passing through security. I watched to see her one more time before boarding—but she was gone.

25

"Life is suffering." Buddha

I filled up at Pemex and decided to ride into Colima, maybe an hour and a half south, then inland. It's a beautiful colonial city. It must have been, or is, a state capital. It's big, with a grand plaza. It's also where I met the German guy whose family wanted me to

take care of him on the ride to South America. The farther I drove the less I cared about getting there, or anything else for that matter. I was becoming disjointed again, slowing to twenty miles an hour, thinking about a bad acid trip in my twenties. It had taken months for me to get right—days to get over the hallucinations—weeks for my reality clock to reset. All of which turned out to be minor considerations, compared to getting back my sense of self. A bad LSD experience guilt-trips you. I couldn't laugh at jokes made at someone's expense because it meant I was cruel. My every action needed to be caring. The government should use bad acid trips to keep the body-politic in line—the ultimate tool for the PC arsenal. At that point of my life, I had areas of uncaring I needed to work on, like sarcasm, but my guilt demanded I throw out irony with it. The main lesson from a bad trip is that physical pain, loss of life and limb, are nothing compared to the raw loss of soul and spirit! I pulled off the road. Death meant nothing to me now! My future would be a life and death struggle for my spirit. If I gave in, it would be over, and I didn't see the energy to save myself.

Why did I let her go? I would do anything to save her but nothing to keep her. I swung the Jeep around and headed back in the direction of the airport. How long was her layover in Mexico City? I had to catch her. Now I had purpose. Coming down to the coast highway, I let off the gas to watch a black Suburban pass going south. Turning north, I cursed the motherfuckers and pushed the Jeep to seventy miles an hour. Making the left to the Playa Del Oro, she started clattering—a sound I recognized—rod knock. Just a few more miles, so I slowed to forty-five. The racket got louder and I somehow enjoyed it. It took me back to being a teenager. The airport came into view. The clatter was deafening, with acrid smoke pouring out the tailpipe and from under the hood. I made it into the short-term parking lot just as she threw a rod. What that means is the connecting rod, between the piston and the crankshaft breaks, and the loose rod end, whipping around, works to destroy the engine block. I coasted into a parking space. This ride was over. Remembering the Feds I'd seen on the highway, I moved fast into the terminal.

Interestingly, life-threatening circumstances can motivate, even a broken man towards self-preservation. I wasn't safe here. I wasn't safe in the United States. Tara had made the better choice with Chile. What I settled for was a flight to Mexico City, which was getting ready to board, from there routing non-stop to Vancouver. Just because Tara had gotten out without a problem, didn't give me any self-assurance as the clerk scanned my Canadian Passport. Maybe it would be me on the no-fly list, or the detain list. I gave her my credit card and she printed my tickets. I checked my bag and guitar case. Watching them go through the hanging rubber, portal strips behind her, I remembered I was wearing my waist-pack and knife. The clerk had the duffel brought back so I could put my waist-pack in it. I imagined the look Tara would have given me for forgetting to check the knife. I was missing the abuse! I went to the bathroom, then stopped by the shop where they sell candy and newspapers, where they had yesterday's *Los Angeles Times*. Thirty minutes later we lifted from the runway, into an orange sun laying on the horizon.

I hate flying, but tonight I didn't much care. The flight to Benito Juarez Airport was short and the *Times* got me through it. The last hour, I looked down on the sun, disappearing into the Pacific. I thought about John Ford, who directed *Stagecoach*. He shot everything from eye level, from a human perspective.

The *Times* had been depressing. One article had Chris Christie predicting Romney would turn the tables in the first debate with Obama. That wasn't worth thinking about. Instead, I fantasized that each news show be required to have a guest panelist who's not being paid or running for office—like me, or Jesse Ventura. Someone who could ask the real questions. Jesse's always running but he won't win so he'd be okay. He could ask Christie, "How can you speak for a whole state when you can't even manage your own body?" It's a fair question. Imagine what Christie has to force into that gullet when nobody's around, to keep his trim.

Mexico City is huge. We drifted in for miles across barrios lit with yellow, muted bulbs, at half power. Finally, taxiing to a stop, I was first out of my seat, weaving my way to the exit, slipping by people in the aisle reaching for their overhead luggage. One woman gave me a deserved look as I rubbed by. Since my bag and guitar were checked through to Canada, all I needed was to get off this plane, which I managed to do, only to find Benito Juarez Airport to be like LAX—huge! I took some deep breathes and found an information counter. LAN, the Chilean airline, was at the far end of the next terminal. She was pointing to where I could catch a bus but I was already headed through the doors, into the night, running. With my feet, I don't usually run. I would pay later, but tonight I ran. Once inside, I looked for an *arrivals and departures* board. I would get on that plane, no matter what! There it was, LAN to Santiago—7:25. No clock. I scanned for a clock. How the fuck could they not have a clock? I saw the LAN counter and the clerk, standing by herself. I glanced back up for the flight number and moved fast to the counter.

“Please,” I asked. “Flight 2121 to Santiago. When does it depart?”

“Ten minutes ago,” she said. “Are you a ticket holder?” I told her no and walked away—as forlorn as I ever remember.

Vancouver! I got off the plane and felt safe, something I hadn't felt in a while. Here, I was a citizen and this is not a police state. I called Vern's number from the terminal. The message said the phone was disconnected. I called Nancy and a woman picked up—her sister. She asked what I was calling about and I told her. Then she told me. From San Felipe, Nancy and Vern had cut over to Ensenada, and from there, taken the old road to Tijuana. There's a pay road, a freeway, which didn't used to be there. Anyone who can pay, uses the new road. Even the toll road isn't safe because gangs stop buses and kidnap passengers. The old road parallels the pay road from Tijuana south for about forty miles, through small towns and tourist spots along the coast. The last twenty miles the road goes inland through the mountains into Ensenada. Their van had

been found abandoned on that stretch of road, the evening of the day after we said goodbye. There had been neither ransom demands nor any word from them. I was in shock. I wanted to talk with Tara. I'd suggested the *old road* to Vern!

Don't burn bridges! You just might need them. That's what I thought when I remembered Jeremy lived in Vancouver, where he practiced law. He was the guy who came alongside me on a BMW in the Yukon, asking where I was headed. He rode with me above the Arctic Circle to Eagle Plains. Jeremy, who sympathy crashed for his girlfriend in Baja—the same Jeremy I left in Santa Rosalia. I called him and we talked. We met for dinner and talked more. He was no longer with his girlfriend but they were still friends. He knew me to be an adventurous spirit but I don't think he was ready for anything like the story I had for him tonight. He invited me to stay at his place—he'd make some calls in the morning. The next morning, Jeremy's phone calls supported Nancy's least desirable option. There were no charges against Tara, or me.

26

My life is best described by a sign I saw in a tattoo parlor: *All Sales Are Final.*

I went home. Home was a known quantity, somewhere I knew what was required. Which was okay because I had no future—just an excruciating now. To deal with my emptiness, I practiced the theory of *searches and finds* I'd picked up from my high-school friend, Willie Blackfoot. It's simple enough: quit searching for it, let it find you. Let it go, see if it comes back on its own.

Gradually, I settled back into my life. Carla knew about Tara. She sensed my emptiness but never talked about it directly. Maybe

my lack of energy assured her it was over, but I wasn't getting a *bye* from my wife on this—just a respite before the storm.

Then again, Carla's an amazing woman—full of surprises. Both Valerie, our neighbor, and Carla had been watching *Big Love*, a series about polygamous Mormons in Utah. They liked to joke about being sister wives. One morning Carla shook up Valerie's middle class sensibilities with the idea that another woman in the house had the potential of making things better, if that woman were someone she liked.

There's a generational divide between Carla and Valerie. Carla's older with more experience, from a different time and place. The late 60's and the Bay Area—which puts her light years ahead of what we have now—political correctness. Carla became a woman during the years when the status quo took a beating. She's also the queen, and in that role she's not threatened.

I found the discussion interesting but of no consequence to me. The two times I made a call to Punta Arenas, Tara hadn't called back. Cisco called back. The first time, he told me Tara had worked through what had gone on between us and she wished me well. The second time, he told me she was seeing someone her own age and she wished me well. I felt like someone who'd fallen down a well with no way to climb out. I didn't want out. I went about my life, seemingly content to those around me. Sometimes, I was content but not much inside of me was alive. I couldn't come to terms with how badly I'd misjudged things. I'd been sure Tara was as attached to me as I was to her. That was the one thing I'd been sure of, but it wasn't true. Each time I thought of her being with some younger Chilean, the life force drained from my body.

If that weren't enough, I was under surveillance. Police cars came down my alley frequently and three times I saw black Suburbans, parked, watching me. I found a tracker on my Jetta that I re-installed on an Ashland police vehicle. Then, as months went by, their interest in me faded. I took to riding my bicycle and motorcycle, which didn't have trackers. After a few months I forgot about surveillance.

I made calls to Nancy's sister in San Francisco. There were no updates. Because Nancy and Vern hadn't talked to anyone about me, or Tara, other than to say how sorry I was, there was nothing more to do. With no charges, and no Nancy, there was no reason to go to court. I didn't know any member of Congress, so I put it on the back burner. But I had been writing and I knew what Vern would do in my place. This had been mostly about one amendment—the Fourth Amendment: "The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized."

Putting a tracker on my vehicle, trespassing on my property to place it, without probable cause, without a warrant, was illegal. I remembered Vern talking about the news media, the court of public opinion. That's where I was headed and the best place to start was *Rolling Stone*, a magazine that had deftly established itself as a political commentator in the world of print, without corporate influence. To illustrate the deteriorating relationship between our citizens and our government, I spent the better part of several months, researching and writing an article about the events of my recent past. I sent my article to *Rolling Stone*, and to my amazement, they got back to me with an offer to publish. The article received national attention, which ended my harassment, and, I expect, any harassment of Tara, if they had any idea of her whereabouts.

“I’m no homewrecker.” Tara Comstock

In the months before Tara picked me up at Safeway, I’d become tired of, and quit Facebook—another organized infringement on privacy. I had maybe two hundred friends, some from motorcycling, some from school, some who never posted at all. Others were prolific. One who posted often was Katya, Cisco’s Russian girlfriend, who rides mountain bikes and likes to pose for pictures. She’d been my friend on Facebook and every so often she’d post an album of new pictures. Now, she’s online friends with Carla. One afternoon over lunch, Carla asked if I missed Facebook? I did but overall I was satisfied to have it behind me. She mentioned Katya had posted pictures of the summer motorcycle tours with Cisco.

We were coming into the summer months here. That got me thinking about an old surf movie, *The Endless Summer*. If one travelled between Oregon and Chile, at the right times, there would be no winter. I wondered if I might find in the photos, one of Tara? But was I ready for one with her boyfriend? Later, when Carla drove to Medford for errands, I couldn’t resist. Her iPad was in the dining room, with no password to get on. I opened Facebook and scrolled down until I came to the seventy-two photos in Katya’s album. Slowly, I went through them. Many of Katya. Plenty of Cisco, some with a serious South American expression. I need to get down there. There were pictures of bicycle trips and Cisco’s house, but none of Tara. I went through the album twice and was about to shut it down when something made me go back to a picture taken in the house. The shot was of a woman, from the neck to the knees—probably five or six months pregnant. I slowly continued through the pictures looking for what had given me pause. And there it was, a picture of the same pregnant woman, mostly obscured by another woman. It was colder weather, maybe this past

month. She was wearing a sheepskin jacket and her belly, even covered by the jacket, was enormous. But what had drawn me back were the boots—Twisted X!

Every fiber in me fired. Why hadn't anyone told me? If Tara had a new love and they were having a baby, wouldn't she have told me? Wouldn't Cisco have told me? Immediately, I called Louis, my urologist. I hadn't talked with him since he de-bulked my prostate years ago, but now I had to. I excitedly explained to his receptionist I had to talk with him—it was serious! He was with a patient but she would give him the message. I paced around the house, then walked around the block twice. I was getting ready to call him back when I got a blocked call—it was him. He remembered me. He asked about my urination? Was everything still working well? I told him it was and asked my question. Was it possible for a woman to get pregnant by a man who'd had the de-bulking procedure?

“Alex,” he said. “The medical term for your condition is ‘retrograde ejaculation’. As you know, that means you ejaculate into the bladder, from where it’s urinated out. Pregnancy is possible if the sperm is separated from the urine while it’s still viable, but that’s not what you’re asking. Your question is whether a woman can get pregnant by you during regular sex? Generally, the answer is no, but with some men who’ve had laser de-bulking, enough sperm comes out during ejaculation to make it possible. My answer is it’s possible, but not likely.”

I walked up into the hills and thought through those last few days the way Detective Columbo might think about a crime scene. I took apart each day, hour by hour, before remembering something. Tara had been sick in the mornings. At the pharmacy, she didn't want me to go in and I didn't remember her bringing anything back? Then later that day she told me she needed to be on her own. How long had it been since the first time we'd made love? I tried counting the days—maybe three weeks? Had there been enough time for a pregnancy test to come back positive?

At home, Carla was back and wanted some help with groceries. She asked if I was all right. Fine—I was fine! I went upstairs and

went online. Three weeks was enough time but she needed to have gotten pregnant those first couple of times. It was just enough time for the test to have been positive. Several women online thought they'd gotten pregnant from pre-sperm, which bolstered my theory. Maybe the morning sickness had Tara thinking she was pregnant? Maybe she took the test while she was in the back of the Jeep? Which would explain her shift in attitude—a baby would make our situation impossible. Was it possible? At least as possible as the virile Chilean guy theory, which presupposed Tara fell in love on day one, got pregnant on day two, and decided to keep the baby? That's another thing! If it's our baby, and she knew she was pregnant, she didn't tell me, but she'd decided to keep the baby? I needed to call Cisco!

I went to the calendar and counted days. Say she got pregnant on September the thirteenth, the due date is June 7th. Today! I called Cisco—couldn't get him on his cell so I tried his office. His secretary said he was doing something about a motorcycle tour online. She would give him the message. I called bullshit! He came to the phone.

“You could have told me, motherfucker!” There was hesitation. “Has she had the baby?” Again the hesitation.

“You need to ask her,” he said.

“Cisco, wake the fuck up! You've held a tight line for her, but now I know. Did she have the baby?”

“Yes. Two nights ago—a girl.”

“Please tell her congratulations for me and ask her to call when she can.”

“Alex,” he said. “I'm sorry, but she asked me to make it so you didn't know...”

“Cisco, you did nothing wrong. I don't have a problem with you, except what you said about her seeing someone else. Whether that was true or not, that hurt. And you best not say another word or I'll come through the phone! I love you my friend!”

The next days were a maze for me. I wanted her to call but I didn't want to think about it. If it were another man's baby, why would

she call? All I controlled with Tara was my presence and my absence. Which was truer now than ever. If she didn't call, any call from me would be a mistake. I was out of Tara's life unless she brought me in.

I came clean with Carla showing her the two pictures in the photo album and recounting my talk with Cisco. She wanted me to move out right then but I decided to do nothing for the time being. I played the guitar and wrote. I talked with friends. I told no one. There was too much at stake. I worked at being unattached, which wasn't as difficult as those first weeks when Tara left. My mind asked all the usual questions. If Tara wanted to be with me, would I leave Carla? If Carla demanded I not have Tara and the baby in my life, would I accept that? Neither possibility worked for me, so doing nothing seemed my best option—my only possibility for avoiding colossal mistakes.

It took three days before Carla wanted to talk. From her first words, it was obvious I was dealing with a *woman scorned*. I would be listening more than talking. She'd been thinking about it and some things had come up for her. She admitted to giving me some latitude out on the road as long as I didn't bring a problem home. She also accepted my being the father as a minor miracle of modern science—one she couldn't hold me totally responsible for. She talked about responsibility. She recognized I would have a financial responsibility to the baby, and possibly Tara, but she couldn't deal with anything more, if there were to be any chance for us to stay together. If I wanted to be in the baby's life, I would have to leave.

There was a good chance Tara was done with me. Then again, she might call with the unexpected. Probably not. What I wanted was Carla, Tara, and the baby. But I didn't go there. If Carla asked me, I'd tell her, but for now, while she was staking out her defensive perimeter, it didn't matter what I wanted. But there was something I did know. Carla loves babies, anybody's babies, and if there's something she loathes, it's a parent who's not there for a child.

I didn't hear anything from Tara for more than six weeks, then on the 25th of July, she sent an email:

Alex, I'll be flying into Las Vegas, August 5th, on U.S. Airways, arriving at 7:52 PM. I want to talk with you, but not over the phone. If you could meet us at the airport, that would be best. Since I know your disposition towards honesty, please don't come unless Carla knows you're coming. If you decide to come, let me know and I'll update flight information.

Tara

I replied I'd be there and copied Carla.

28

“Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s. Render unto God that which is God’s.” Jesus of Nazareth

I'd been to Vegas many times but never to McCarran Airport. I got there early, maybe forty minutes before her flight, time I spent nervously walking back and forth through the terminal. I was surprised to see U.S. Airways on the arrival board. The times I'd come from Chile, it was LAN—flying into LA.

Soon, the first passengers came through the tunnel to retrieve their luggage and proceed to customs. Every second hung in the air when she didn't show. The last of the new arrivals retrieved their luggage and lined up for customs. Then I saw her come into the baggage-claim area. She hadn't seen me, a good thing because I wasn't at my best. I could see she'd be a few minutes clearing customs so I walked again to the other end of the terminal and back, trying to center myself, remembering to breathe.

She was talking with an immigration officer, the baby in a front-pack, balanced by a small backpack. On the floor next to her, she had her Harley bag. Coming into our summer from Chile, she was dressed for the cold: Levis, the white sheepskin jacket, and her Twisted X boots. She was animated in conversation, laughing at something before the agent stamped her passport. She picked up the Harley bag and came into the terminal, looking around. I wasn't doing anything to make myself obvious. She looked in my direction and our eyes met—my cue to come and get her bag. I picked it up, then set it back down, with people streaming by us, like water rounding boulders in a swollen creek. I couldn't hug her because of the baby.

"I'm tired," she said. "I'm carrying a back pack and a baby, with whom I've just spent twenty-four hours getting here. Could you get us away from all these people?" I picked up the bag, took her arm, and crossed the crowd diagonally to a less populated section of the terminal with a couple of benches along one wall. I set the bag down and helped her out of the backpack, trying to see the baby who was nuzzled into her mother. We sat down. I still hadn't said anything.

"How are you?" she asked. That was easy.

"Good. And you?"

"I'm not sure," she said, not looking at me.

I didn't know what to say to that.

"You must want to know if this is your daughter?" I was grateful she brought it up, but at the same time, tears were beginning to form somewhere between my throat that couldn't swallow and my eyes. I didn't want tears. I looked at her and nodded.

"It's been more than a year since I've been with anyone but you."

"What's her name?"

"Bonneville. It means beautiful town. Bonneville Comstock. I almost named her Ford. I need to eat. The food on the plane wasn't good, but I don't want to be in Vegas."

"Where do you want to be?" I asked, through a tightness in my chest and throat."

“I’m thinking we’ll go to Southern California, get a place near the beach. Maybe not work for awhile—just hang with Bonne.”

“If we head towards the coast,” I said, “the fastest way is through Barstow.”

“I remember heading towards Barstow, at 130 miles an hour with me watching for cops. It’s hot here,” she said. Even at nine at night, it was still in the low eighties. “It was snowing when Katya took me to the airport. They both send their love, and Cisco sent a message.”

“What is it?”

“Good luck motherfucker!” she imitated the way he would say it.

I carried her things and we walked out to the car.

“What car is this?”

“It’s a Jetta Turbo Diesel. I got it because it’s black everywhere, and gets fifty miles to the gallon. I had the rims powder coated black, to ghettoize it.

“And look,” she said, “it comes with a new carseat in the back. The only thing that isn’t black. She’s sleeping, so I’m going to sit with her in the front.” I followed the Strip west, out of town, rather than opting for the freeway.

“Why did you come back?” I asked.

“I owed it to you. I wanted you to meet your daughter.”

“I appreciate that. I really appreciate that.”

“Art sold the Ford.” I almost asked her how much she got but it wasn’t important.

“How are things at home?” she asked

“They’re good. My youngest and Manny are living in LA, both doing well. They took all the noise with them.”

“And you and Carla?”

“It’s a big change to have the boys gone. The kids acted as a buffer in our relationship.”

“How do you deal with them being gone?”

“Not too bad. If I’m having breakfast, Carla mostly stops texting and Facebook to talk with me. We do things together and we

share some stuff, as long as I don't talk about politics, the economy, or guy stuff. I've eased up on my expectations and lately my time's been taken up."

"With what?"

"I've been writing a few hours a day about what happened with you and me. Sometimes I take a motorcycle trip. There's always work on the rentals and the house—not much time to be bored."

"How's the writing?"

"I look forward to it."

We passed Jean and came into the lights of Primm.

"What about the Primm Valley Casino or IHOP?" I asked.

"Definitely IHOP. I can eat a bunch of breakfast."

We walked through Terrible's Casino. Being a weeknight and after nine, the place was almost empty. Tara spotted the Bonnie and Clyde cars and asked if I'd seen them since we were here.

"No, I haven't been anywhere we've been," I said.

"Why is that?"

"I just can't..." I trailed off. We got a booth and she asked the waitress if we could order right away.

"Still the same Alex," she said. I didn't ask what she meant.

"Are you a good writer, Alex?"

"Maybe not, I don't know how to tell. It's not like building a house where I can stand back and look. The problem with my novel is I never see it from a disinterested place. But the writing gets better when I write about who I am, which makes it okay to write from an unresolved place."

The food came and we ate while the baby slept.

"I have something for you," she said, rummaging through her back pack, coming up with a small, leather organizer. She flipped through some papers, handing one to me, a Chilean Certificate of Live Birth: Bonneville Comstock. Mother—Tara Constance Comstock. Father—Alex Westbend. Bonne was two months old today. I said it. She knew.

“I read your article in *Rolling Stone*. That’s the first I heard about what happened to Nancy and Vern. I could hardly believe what I was reading. Is there anything more you can tell me?”

“No, nothing. No one, other than us, has come forward as having seen them since the morning they left our camp. No suspects in their disappearance.”

“Alex, of all that happened to us, Nancy and Vern are the hardest for me. I think because I don’t know, I can’t put it to rest.”

“Why didn’t you call me and why didn’t you take my calls?” I asked.

“I don’t know?”

“Those mornings when I thought you were sick with the *turistas*, was it *morning sickness*?”

“Yeah, it was. I’d assumed you couldn’t get me pregnant.”

“When did you know?”

“In the back of the Jeep while you drove. I bought a pregnancy test at the pharmacy.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you fucked up my life, Alex.”

“Getting you out of that shed. Dealing with the Prescott posse? That fucked up your life? My article that got Swamis canned. That fucked up your life? That I was willing to put my life on the line and not leave you. That fucked up your life?”

“That’s not what I mean, Alex. You fucked up my life! I’m thirty-six years old. I have a baby, with no idea what I’m doing, or where I’m going.”

“Get real Tara! Would you rather not have Bonne? You’re alive. You have some money. You chose to have the baby. When did you decide to have her?”

“When the test strip showed blue. I never considered not having her.”

“When were you going to tell me?”

“I wasn’t, but Cisco and Katya thought it was unfair.”

“Tell me again why you came back?”

“We have a daughter. Am I supposed to tell you by email? Men are so stupid.”

“Tara, when there’s only two choices and one of them doesn’t fit, then it’s the other. You wanted this baby. How bad can things be?”

“Did you tell Carla about us—about the baby?”

“I did. She knows I’m here. She doesn’t want to hear any of it, but sometimes I read to her, what I’ve written.” Tara laughed, loud enough that I thought she would wake Bonne.

“You tell Carla about us by sharing bits from a novel?”

“It’s all in there, you and me, now the baby, everything, as fiction. We talk about it and she lets me know what she thinks.”

“Like what?”

“Like I’m out of my mind to think I could have a relationship with you and be with her. Like I’m whacked to think I could bring you home, with or without a baby, or that I could bring the baby home, if there were no you—even though I’m her father.”

“So, it’s not just me who knows you’re crazy!”

“You can’t go by that Tara. You don’t know how things will play out. Follow the plot. Don’t create it! You need to come to Oregon with me.”

“I told you. I’m no home wrecker, Alex.”

“It’s not about wrecking a home. We need to sit down with Carla and talk this out. I love Carla and I love you. Just give it a chance and see what happens. What do you lose by coming back with me. I’m the one who stands to lose.”

“Alex, listen to me! Do you really think Carla’s going to make me part of her family?”

“I don’t know. Carla’s a remarkable woman. Besides, life trumps everything. In some ways, it would be better for Carla with you around. Her interest in me is limited. What we share together comes out of our history and friendship, but more often than not, she’d rather spend time with her friends than with me. Now something needs to shift, because I don’t want to be without either of you. If nothing else, we need to live in the same town.”

“Who’s going to pay for all these houses, Alex?”

“I will. There’s no question. Family’s everything to me.”

“You, and some of your Mormon buddies,” she said.

“Tara, you can give me a hard time but you didn’t have Bonne because you’re against abortion. You didn’t become my lover because you’re a home wrecker. And you didn’t come back because it was the right thing to do.”

“So you want me to drop out of a novel into Carla’s lap?”

“No. I told her the whole story before I left to come here.” She moved a bit of home fry around her plate with a fork. She shifted in the booth and took off Bonne’s hat revealing a surprising amount of her mother’s brown hair.

“Will you come with me?”

“I can’t imagine why.”

“You wanna stay here tonight?”

“No, let’s get somewhere that isn’t in your novel, but first I want to show you something. She dug into the backpack again, for some printed pages she passed to me.

la diabla

the wind is a cruel mistress
norteamericanos don't know her
unless they live on lake superior
or spend hurricane season
on the gulf coast
in spanish
the devil is *el diablo*
but the wind is *la diabla*
she hides
and waits for my motorcycle
at the top of a rise
where the gravel is fresh and deep
she takes in a great breath
to give back the same gusts
that pounded magellan’s ship
down this coast
patagonia
the land of short bushes

people with big feet
to resist the power
of *la diabla*

with good fortune
you come to understand her
her personality
she sometimes loses focus
she forgets about you
your chance to escape her
then in a mood swing
she's back
blowing you across the mounds of gravel
between tire tracks
I curse myself
"ride this bike you fucking baby
or get off and walk"
I plead with myself
"you can do this"
all day I struggle
my arms and neck are nothing but pain
from leaning the bike hard right
to fight the wind
and in an instant I'm down
skidding on the pannier
12 days
4000 kilometers
impossible switchbacks
and always *la diabla*
all this I survived
to be down
on a straight road
from a bit of sand
like a prizefighter
who's survived vicious hooks
and a pounding to the body

finding himself
on his ass
from a slight jab

but it's not the sand
it's the wind
she has robbed my soul
she has sucked my energy
and put me down
i gaze out on
this beautiful patagonia
and el diablo
racing through the tall grasses

“You recognize it?” she asked.

“Yeah, crossing the Andes with Cisco. My first poem.”

“It's part of his brochure.”

I paid the bill and picked up the backpack.

“I want to see the cars one more time,” she said, crossing the floor towards the Ford and the Lincoln. At the same instant I saw him coming from the gambling area. He looked bad. Someone who'd struggled to become subhuman and finally made it. Closer now, I could see his eyes, once alive with hatred and bitterness, now vacant, yet purposeful. He walked towards us with deliberateness. I caught up with Tara.

“Walk to the wall, turn back towards IHOP, and keep on walking!” She turned just enough to see him coming.

“You have a gun?” she asked.

“Just walk, Tara.”

Swamis held a pistol he didn't try to hide as he closed the thirty feet between us. He took a stance called the *weaver* and fired over Clyde's hood. Going low around the back of the Lincoln to the far side, I heard the shot hit metal, making that ricochet sound from cowboy movies. I could see Tara heading for the restaurant and something wasn't right. He fired twice more from between the

cars. The first shot broke glass and the second made a dull thud. I couldn't see him because I was on the Lincoln running board, crouched down low, holding onto the door handle, listening intently for his footsteps. But there was no sound. I maintained the position until I could no longer take the pain in my legs, then broke for the casino, like a tight end with bad feet putting moves on a linebacker. I anticipated shots to rip through my back. Again there was nothing. I looked back and saw Swamis laid out on the concrete floor between the cars.

I ran for the IHOP on legs weak with fear. The staff had scrambled. Only Tara and the baby were there. Tara was leaning on a wall for support, both arms around the baby. I walked up to her, checking her and the baby, like I did my youngest, when he was born. Back then, I was counting fingers and toes. Now I was looking for blood. One thing about blood—it's easy to see. There was none, and somehow, Bonneville had slept through the whole thing. Out on the floor were voices, and somewhere, a siren. Tara was in huge shock. I put my hands on her cheeks and rubbed her face gently. She let me do that for a few seconds before reaching behind her head and pulling back her hair away from her ear, on top of which, sat one, dark, crimson drop of blood, where the slug had touched her.

Murphy's law has it right: if there're two thousand cops in Nevada, you get the two you know. After a round of preliminary questions, and what seemed an hour, the crime scene investigators and two homicide detectives arrived, demoting our guys to enforcing *Crime Scene—Do Not Cross* duty. The detectives didn't make us go into Vegas. They took our statements, after letting me know we needed to stay in Nevada to be available for further questions. I lied, saying we were staying at Primm for a few days.

Tara stayed in the IHOP with one detective and a cup of coffee while I walked with his partner to the crime scene. He asked me questions, outside the cordoned-off area, while photographers and others did their work inside. Two paramedics, assisted by a third, zipped Swamis into a body bag, loaded him on a rolling cart and

headed for the parking lot. What they left behind was a puddle of blood, a couple of feet from the Lincoln. The detective asked if I was carrying. I told him no. He asked if I'd been carrying at any time during the incident. I told him I no longer owned a handgun.

He motioned me to step over the yellow tape, reminding me to not touch either of the cars, or disturb the blood. He asked me to recall what had happened, step by step, while he recorded with his phone. I told him the first shot hit metal. I was certain it hadn't hit the Lincoln. We checked the Ford for a fresh bullet hole, which we didn't find. Then I remembered Swamis firing across the hood when I heard the ricochet. Which told me where to look, and I found shiny damage on the roof support, between the windshield and the passenger window, where the slug had glanced off towards the restaurant. We followed the trajectory to where it had hit the wall behind Tara and the baby. The second shot had passed through the Lincoln's front, passenger window and cracked, but not exited, the rear, driver's side window. That left the third shot. Swamis knew I was on the other side of the Lincoln and he meant to shoot me—right through the doors. He didn't know there were sheets of lead under the body.

While Bonnie and Clyde's car was riddled with gunshot holes, the Lincoln showed only shallow, dimpled dents in the skin, where slugs had been rejected by the lead. I squatted down, looking for a fresh dent, mindful to not step in the blood. It wasn't hard to find. The dozen or so dents from Clyde's machine gun showed the dull patina of decades, but one gleamed fresh steel at the edges. I conjectured out loud that to get hit in the face with his own bullet, he must have been squatted down, maybe leaning against Clyde's Ford? But he would have known that firing through the door would make shrapnel? Then again, the look I'd seen in Swamis' eyes was beyond shrapnel. The detective said I was free to go, reminding me to not leave Nevada.

I walked back to the IHOP.

“Let's go,” said Tara.

“We can't leave Nevada.”

“Fuck Nevada!” she said. “Did they give you money for a room and food for the baby?”

“No...”

“Then fuck Nevada!”

We walked out to the VW. This time she put Bonneville into the car seat.

“You knew enough to get the infant seat?” she said, figuring out how to make it work. “You sure you have this secured properly?”

“You think I’m stupid?” She gave me a look. I opened the front passenger door for her to get in. She put her arms around me and kissed me hard on the mouth. We drove under the Interstate and turned west towards California, past the convenience store, and the broken concrete road heading north to Death Valley, as the baby woke up, expressing in one huge cry, her feelings about the night.

With unforeseen dread waiting along the road, Tara and Alex clash over wounded self-worth and unfulfilled lives, unaware that reality will soon dispute their courage and shake out their values—demanding untold trust from each other—if only to stay alive.

