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## **Book Proposal: *Thirty Days in Camelot***

**A Novel**

WGA Reg. #1747671

*Thirty Days in Camelot* is a noir-style murder mystery, and a story of personal loss and recovery. It is the story of Michael Milano's unhinged quest to solve the mystery of his brother's life, while an LAPD Homicide detective, Travis Carl, attempts to solve the mystery of his death. It is fundamentally Michael's story, and it is told from his point of view, in the first person. While Detective Carl methodically interviews witnesses and sifts through evidence, Michael meanders through the underbelly of the Los Angeles where his brother lived, battered by his indecisive memories and emotions. In the end, Detective Carl gets his arrest, and Michael gets a bit of redemption for the sins of an inattentive life.

Thank you for your consideration.

## Synopsis

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### **Thirty Days in Camelot By Gary Campanella**

Michael Milano wakes up from a deep sleep disoriented. He finds himself at a desert campsite, and he is not alone. The girl asleep across the campsite is the girlfriend of his brother Jeff, who had been murdered the previous month. Toni, a young Latina girl, has a troubled past. Michael tells us that he has driven to Los Angeles from his home outside Boston, Massachusetts to claim his brother's body, clean up his affairs and possessions, and meet with the detective who is handling the murder investigation. When he learns that Toni is missing, he travels out to the Mojave Desert to find her, finds her, and then gets lost.

Michael is consumed by both the recent losses in his life, and by his lack of passion for anything remaining in his life. His career has floundered. He tells us how his mother died from lung cancer almost a year before his brother, how his father was never much of a presence in his life, and how he became withdrawn from his wife and job after his mother's passing. He tells us how his wife left him six months later, and how he has been floating through his job and his routines ever since.

The news of his brother's death is a catalyst. He left his job and drove to California for some answers about who he lost in Jeff, and what it all might mean for him and the rest of his life. Michael Milan is in his early forties.

Toni is sleeping or silent for most of the first two chapters, as Michael tells us about himself and his past. Toni eventually opens up about her past, and the two agree to return to the San Fernando Valley apartment that she shared with Jeff to take care of affairs and figure out what is next for each of them.

Meanwhile, Detective Travis Carl has begun working the murder case, which feels a lot like a robbery or drug deal gone really badly. Michael meets with Detective Carl and learns the basic facts of the murder: It took place on the front steps of an Echo Park boarding house called "The Camelot," that Jeff was coming to visit a friend, Kenny, who was staying there, that he had never made it inside, and that no witnesses had yet come forward. Michael and Detective Carl eventually develop a rapport.

With Toni in tow, Michael meets Kenny and learns more about Jeff's life. He meets other friends as well. Michael temporarily moves into Jeff's apartment with Toni while he takes care of things and learns more about Jeff. He realizes, to some extent, that he is "putting on Jeff's life" in his efforts to get to know who he was.

Toni, meanwhile, displays her resiliency by finding a job at a local supermarket and restarting her life.

Detective Carl continues his investigation and eventually turns up a few facts related to Kenny that do not add up. He also identifies another potential suspect from the boarding house.

Michael has his own suspicions about Kenny, and he is a little of afraid of him. He also learns that an immigration attorney that Kenny and Jeff had both been doing work for was an important influence on Jeff. The attorney, Carmine Egleston, or "Eagle," lives in southern Oregon, and so Michael drives up to meet him. Typically, Michael is introspective during the drive.

Eagle is 65ish. He is an ex-hippie, a practicing attorney, and he sports a big personality and a passion for helping immigrants get green cards, citizenship, and public services. He practices in California, keeps a residence at the Camelot, but lives in Ashland, Oregon. Eagle explains that his work is more than filling out forms, and that Jeff was great at helping with the nitty-gritty work of engaging with families and helping with logistics. Eagle has a wife, Lori, a free spirit in her mid-thirties, and a toddler son. Michael admires and envies Eagle and laments the emptiness of his own life on his drive back to Los Angeles. He stops at a remote truck stop in Northern California, can't get a cell signal, and calls his ex-wife from a payphone. They speak only briefly, but she is concerned for him and he senses something like forgiveness in her tone.

While Michael is driving back, Detective Carl interrogates his suspect and learns that the man, a Mexican national who speaks no English, was actually a witness to the murder.

Also while Michael is driving back, Toni's grief, which has been deferred, finally engulfs her, and she swallows a bottle of pills. After his conversation with his ex-wife, Michael thinks about something other than his own misery for the first time, and realizes that Toni, being alone for the first time in the apartment that she and Jeff shared, was probably feeling too much for her tough exterior to hold back. He races the last few miles home and finds her just in time to save her.

A few days pass while Detective Carl works with Oregon police to question Eagle, who was identified by Carl's witness as the murderer. His case is weak. He has one unreliable witness and no physical evidence, and so he really needs a confession. Eagle senses this and toys with the detective.

Meanwhile, Michael stays with Toni at the hospital and gets her set up for a two-day inpatient psych evaluation. Feeling different, but disoriented, he drives to the Camelot to see, again, the place where his brother died. He goes inside for the first time and, on impulse, rents a room. Leaving to visit Toni, he runs into Lori, Eagle's wife, and their child. Lori has been beaten up by Eagle and has run away from him. Lori confesses details of Eagle's abuse, and then impulsively reveals her knowledge of Jeff's murderer. She provides additional details, and the murder weapon.

Events and characters then converge at the Camelot, where Michael needs to face both his own fears and the man who killed his brother, and where Detective Carl finally gets his man.

## Author's Bio

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**I first remember screaming** when my sister's hair caught on fire as she leaned over a jack-o-lantern to see the candle inside. I was three and she was two and we were sitting at the kitchen table of the small apartment my parents rented in Springfield, MA. We were alone in the room and my father raced in and smothered the flames against his bare chest. I was given credit for saving her life, something I remind her about every Halloween, just before she reminds me that I scream like a girl.

I have few other early childhood memories. Just after Halloween that year I fell ill with persistent high fevers and convulsions. I was administered last rites on two occasions. One of my few actual memories is being dunked, naked, feverish, and afraid, into ice water at the hospital. When the fevers finally broke the doctors prescribed phenobarbital to control the convulsions. I took a tablespoon of the red syrup three times a day for the next four years. As a result, I have bad teeth, great calmness, and a collection of disconnected images that serve as early childhood memories. I experience them like photographs. Some are real and some are not. I have no reliable way to distinguish between them.

In the late 70's I left my native New England for college in Wisconsin, then journeyed west, where I walked from Mexico to Canada along a patchwork of trails that soon became the Pacific Crest Trail. Afterwards, I lived for long periods in both New England and Los Angeles, also spending significant amounts of time in the spaces in between. By 1990 I had slept at least one night in 48 of the 50 U.S. states. In the early 1990's I wandered overseas, hiking through Greece, Italy, Turkey and Bulgaria. I then returned to the U.S. and drove a truck. My actions were as disconnected as my memories.

After surviving Y2K, I decided to get serious. Between April 2000 and September 2002 I moved back to Los Angeles, got a good corporate job, got married, bought a house, and had my first child. I now have two children and a bigger house. My new found career has gone well, and I currently lead a global department and facilitate leadership and decision making workshops.

In 2014 I began writing. In earnest. I have completed manuscripts for a novel, a memoir of that Pacific Crest Trail adventure, a few short stories and a chapbook of poems. I am writing like my sister's hair is on fire. I am writing before I forget.

**Gary Campanella** has spent the last fifteen years working in the financial services industry. He also has a Bachelor's degree in English from Ripon College, and completed his graduate work in Composition at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. He lives in La Crescenta, CA with his wife and two children.

*Thirty Days in Camelot* is his first novel.

## Market / Audience

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### **Thirty Days in Camelot By Gary Campanella**

*Thirty Days in Camelot* is first and foremost a murder mystery. It is also a story of personal loss and recovery. It is grounded with an emotional realism and a grittiness that is harvested from the narrator's lack of emotional confidence and direction. Its realism is less dramatized than the "noir realism" of, say Elmore Leonard, and it is more character-driven than traditional murder mysteries like those of Lawrence Sanders or Robert B. Parker. Still, it will appeal to those who love murder mysteries.

The mystery in the murder is entwined with Michael's loss, grief and search for meaning in his life. He is trying to come to terms with the mistakes he has made in his life amidst the realization that many of them are irrevocable. His narration is caught in a kind of rewind loop as he recalls and interprets what he believes are the key moments of his life. He is not unintelligent. He is simply grieving. His appeal as a character is that his weaknesses, doubts, and struggles to overcome them are relatable to many readers of character-driven fiction.

Similarly, Toni, Lori, Detective Carl, Kenny, Eagle, and others are characters that readers of this type of fiction will recognize and be interested by. They are, of course, drawn through Michael's eyes, but that perspective deepens the appeal for readers in this genre. Michael is a stranger in a strange land, a bit of a lamb thrown in with the lions, and so the world he tiptoes around in is a world the reader can vicariously tiptoe around in as well.

Separated from Michael's existential crisis, the murder mystery plot itself is typical of the genre. Fans of this genre will find appeal in the realism of the mystery, which is drawn from the author's acquaintances with detectives, and with his work as a mediator for the Los Angeles Superior Court. Readers will know that most murders are committed by very obvious people for very obvious reasons, and they are solved by detectives who can see the obvious and ask the right questions. They also get lucky.

Finally, the unlikely investigative team of Detective Carl and Michael conclude the novel as friends, leaving the opportunity for additional work in the same style. These characters have good rapport.

## Chapter Outline

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#### ***Prologue – A Fifth of March***

A catalogue of what Michael did on March 5.

#### ***Chapter 1 – Cottonwood***

Michael Milano wakes up disoriented, outside, in the middle of the Mojave Desert. He quickly remembers who he is, how he got there, and that he is not alone: There is a young Mexican girl sleeping in a sleeping bag on the other side of the campfire. He is in no hurry to move, and so reflects back on memories as a teenager, memories of his mother's recent death and his divorce a few months later, and how he first met the Mexican girl, Toni, at his mother's funeral. She was his brother's girlfriend. Michael tells us that his brother has just been murdered.

#### ***Chapter 2 – Spain***

Michael tells us how he got to this makeshift campsite in the desert. He restarts his campfire and begins to make breakfast. Toni continues to sleep and Michael reflects on the fragile state of his psyche. Toni sleeps most of the day, awakens near sunset, and begins talking with Michael over dinner, which Michael has made over a campfire. Toni is both angry and depressed, and expresses to Michael her wish to die young. Michael tells us how conflicted he felt about trying to talk her out of it. It is late when they finish talking and so they spend another night in the desert.

#### ***Chapter 3 – Once Upon A Time***

Michael wakes up early and watches the sunrise. He tells us about his life back in Boston, including his first few jobs after college, and how he started a career writing financial advice for a financial advisory service. He talks about how that career started with promise but slowly stagnated. He tells a long story about a girlfriend he had at the time, his "one that got way" story.

#### ***Chapter 4 – Toni Found***

The morning in the desert resumes. Michael sees a coyote. He makes breakfast and resumes a conversation with Toni. Toni tells Michael a little about her childhood, including her time in

foster homes and her time on the streets as a fifteen-year old-runaway. She finishes her story by telling Michael how she met Jeff.

### ***Chapter 5 – God Knows What***

They finally leave the campsite and head back towards Los Angeles. They have a pleasant but silent drive through the desert, eventually stopping for an early dinner at a Denny's in the Antelope Valley. Toni begins asking questions about Gail, Michael's ex-wife, who Toni had met at Michael's mother's funeral. Toni didn't like Gail and Michael sees no reason to defend her, though he does. He tells a story about when he and Gail first met, and about how they were happy for a long time. After dinner, they decide to drive to the apartment that Toni shared with Jeff.

### ***Chapter 6 – At Home in the Valley***

Michael has negative first impressions of the urban sprawl of the central San Fernando Valley. He is saddened that Jeff, in his early thirties when he died, was living in such a place.

They settle into the apartment, at least for a night. Toni goes to bed and Michael begins looking through Jeff's possessions, trying to get a better picture of who he was, and what his life was like. He recalls a few childhood memories. Michael sleeps uncomfortably on the couch and in the morning takes Toni to another Denny's. He asks her if he can stay in the apartment with her while he settles up the details of Jeff's death and tries to learn more about Jeff's life. She is suspicious but agrees. After breakfast Toni agrees to take Jeff to The Camelot, where Jeff was killed. Along the way she talks about Jeff's two best friends, Kenny and Eagle. She didn't like either one of them.

### ***Chapter 7 – A Carnival Life***

We are introduced to Detective Travis Carl, a well-regarded homicide detective for the LAPD. Michael also tells us about the Detective's wife, Li. He tells us the story of how they met, and Detective Carl's obsession with church carnivals.

Michael and Detective Carl meet in person for the first time, at a police station, and review the details of the case. Detective Carl is diplomatic but Michael feels that he is trying to tell him that the crime was probably drug-related, and not necessarily solvable. Michael leaves and again drives by The Camelot. He wonders about what brought Jeff there, that day and in general.

### ***Chapter 8- Deep Thoughts***

Michael has lunch at a diner across the street from The Camelot and watches people come and go. Later he returns to the apartment and sits by the pool. He's thinking about Jeff and his murder and wishes he could talk with Gail about it. He dozes off and has a short and disturbing dream about Jeff.

Back in the apartment Toni wants to know what the police had to say. Michael has questions about Kenny. They go to a supermarket for food and Toni applies for and gets a job there. Toni tells Michael about Jeff's friendship with Kenny. With the groceries still in the car, they decide to visit Kenny, at Kenny's mother's house, where Toni suspects he is staying.

They meet Kenny, who is fidgety, talks fast, says nothing, and chain smokes. He strikes Michael as a meth-head, though Michael has never actually met a meth-head. They all drink beer in the back yard while Kenny's mom hovers near windows like a shadow. Kenny says he knows nothing about what happened, but tells stories about Jeff. Toni gets irritated and begins antagonizing Kenny. They exchange curses and when Toni curses Eagle as well, Kenny defends him, and tells Michael how Eagle has helped Jeff over the years.

During the conversation, Toni shares that Eagle and Jeff spoke on the morning that Jeff was killed, and that Eagle was in Los Angeles at the time. Kenny admits that he was but that he left early in the morning after signing he and Jeff to take care of some business for him.

### ***Chapter 9 – Cars and Stuff***

Toni breaks down after they leave Kenny's. They pass a traffic accident and Toni suddenly asks, "Where's Jeff's car?" The next morning Michael leaves a message for Detective Carl about the car. He thinks about the conversation with Kenny and is extremely unsettled. It feels to Michael that Jeff's death might be more than something random or, at the very least, that Jeff's life was more than something innocent. None of this is concrete though.

Later in the afternoon Detective Carl returns Michael's call. Michael asks Carl if he knows where Jeff's car is and if he knows who Eagle is. Detective Carl is caught off guard and admits that he doesn't know where the car is or who Eagle is. He warns Michael about trying to conduct his own investigation. Michael is still troubled. He later goes through a box of Jeff's mementos with Toni.

### ***Chapter 10 – A Bit of a Wise Ass***

The next day Michael is still troubled, though he can't decide what's bothering him more, the seediness of Kenny or his own sense of loss. He goes through some paperwork and discovers that Jeff was pretty much living from unsteady paycheck to unsteady paycheck. Michael drives around the Valley some more and tries to see its appeal.

Later in the day he gets a call for Jeff from a small general contractor who Jeff sometimes worked for. Dallas Scott didn't know that Jeff had been killed. They agree to meet the next morning for breakfast.

After getting home from work, Toni and Michael make dinner together, drink wine, and Toni shares more of her hopes and dreams, as well as her past. Michael feels like Toni has turned a corner in her grief, and that she is going to be ok.

The next morning Michael meets Dallas Scott, and he tells Michael about Jeff being a stand-up guy, hard worker, and good friend. He tells him about Jeff's plans for the future, but shares that Jeff was also pretty unpredictable, and would disappear for weeks at a time. They are meeting at a job site, and when they walk through the site, Michael sees Kenny hanging drywall. They talk for awhile and Kenny is his usual jittery self. Michael leaves, talks with Toni about the fuller picture of Jeff that is emerging, and then decides to drive to Oregon to meet Eagle.

### ***Chapter 11 – A Bit of Sadness***

Detective Carl continues his investigation. He finds Jeff's car, which had been towed from in front of The Camelot after the murder and had sat in an impound lot ever since. Carl had been reviewing the tenant lists of The Camelot, as well as any known associates, and eliminating or interviewing them as necessary. He knew that too much time was passing to not have a solid lead yet, and that he was probably spending too much time on the case, but he kept at it because he had an instinct that there was something he was missing. He acknowledged that his instinct probably had more to do with missing the car thing than any nose for crime, but in either case, he kept at it.

### ***Chapter 12 – Tom and Justice***

Michael picks up some interesting hitchhikers on the drive to Oregon who try to teach him about karma. Michael arrives in Ashland, Oregon and tracks down Carmine Egleston, aka Eagle, with little trouble. He arrives at his house and meets Lori, Eagle's wife, who is thirty years his junior. They also have a toddler son, Troy. Michael hits it off with Lori and then, when he meets Eagle, he hits it off with him.

Eagle is 6'4", with long gray hair he wears in a pony tail. He has a big personality and welcomes Michael with condolence and hospitality. He spends time alone with him where he talks about Jeff as a good man. Eagle tells him a few stories about their friendship and the work they did together. Michael, Eagle, Lori, and Troy then have dinner together.

### ***Chapter 13 – Damsel and Dragon***

Michael spends the night at a local motel and returns the next day. From Eagle he learns more about Jeff, that he was doing paralegal-type work for Eagle, and a lot of legwork around getting clients to appointments and filing papers with the courts. He told Michael about a plan to make Jeff a lawyer without going to law school. It is clear to Michael that Eagle liked Jeff, and Jeff is heartened that someone like Eagle was in Jeff's life.

Michael also spends time with Lori, and finds her charming and attractive. He admits to being a little envious of Eagle, and attracted to Lori. Eagle shares that Jeff had a Superman complex, and that was his attraction to Toni.

**Chapter 14 – Desperado**

Detective Carl questions Servando Perez, an ex-con resident of The Camelot. Servando was already being held on a traffic violation when Carl found him, and he had not been having a very good time of it in the LA Central Jail. Servando speaks no English, but through an interpreter, Detective Carl questions him slowly, reeling in his trust, then wearing him down. Finally, Servando admits, “ok. Maybe I saw something.”

**Chapter 15 – A Significant Relationship**

Michael recalls the disintegration of his marriage. He begins the long drive back from Oregon feeling as though he has made an emotional breakthrough. He also can't get his mind off Lori. He enjoys the strange Northern California landscape on his long drive, eventually stopping at a roadside diner for dinner. He goes outside the diner and runs into Tom, one of the karmic hitchhikers he picked up on the way to Oregon. Tom has been abandoned by Autumn and Justice and is devastated. He looks to Michael for advice. Michael feels like the last person who should be giving relationship advice, but he does his best and feels as though he has given good advice when they part ways.

Michael begins thinking about his failures with Gail, and the pathetic end to their marriage. He eventually calls her. He doesn't have much to say and she is concerned to be hearing from him at an odd hour from a faraway place. The conversation is short but he feels like he hears something in her voice that sounds like forgiveness.

**Chapter 16 – El Senor Viejo**

The interrogation of Servando continues. Servando refuses to say anything further, and so Carl goes home for the day.

Early the next morning Carl returns to The Camelot. He finds the room that Servando had been staying in, now occupied by a couple and their three children. He checks the windows of the room to see if there is a view of the front door, the scene of the crime. There isn't. He goes across the street for coffee and reviews the facts of the case as he knows them. Afterwards he returns to the jail to question Servando again. Servando is having a bad time in jail. Detective Carl doesn't press him, but keeps reviewing his statement with him over and over again. Servando finally gives in and explains that Jeff had been stabbed inside one of the rooms. He identifies the murderer.

**Chapter 17 – Distress**

Carl flies to Ashland and questions Eagle, who is too smart to admit to anything. Michael finally arrives home and finds that Toni has tried to commit suicide by taking pills. She is still alive and he rushes her to the hospital. The ER is very busy and he is asked to stay with her and keep her from falling asleep. He spends the night with her, talking to her, cajoling her, keeping her alive.

**Chapter 18 – A Fifth of April**

Michael compares Toni to a family of feral cats that he and Gail had tried to nurture years before. Toni agrees to a two-day voluntary psych eval. Michael goes back to the apartment and falls asleep. He is awakened by a nightmare, and recalls Toni and the look on her face when he found her. He decides to clean the apartment, top to bottom. He leaves to visit Toni, but is feeling off balance and so drives to The Camelot. He sits outside for a long time and watches the front door. He then goes across the street to the diner. He is thinking about the mistakes he made with Gail, what he's going to do about Toni, and wondering if he will ever know who killed his brother.

On impulse, he decides to walk into The Camelot. He has not done this before. On another impulse, he rents a room. He surveys the seedy room and ends up falling asleep. He wakes at twilight, feels disoriented, and decides that he better at least try to see Toni. When he gets to the lobby he finds Lori and Trey there. Lori has been badly beaten. Michael brings them to his room where they relax. He orders them food and Troy falls asleep on the bed. Lori impulsively reveals the identity of the murderer.

**Chapter 19 – Luck**

Carl returns from Oregon and reviews the case. We learn about his investigative process, and where he is in that process on Jeff's murder. Carl then attends to a personal matter.

Eagle is his suspect and he believes that he has enough evidence to arrest him, but a call to Oregon reveals that Eagle is missing. Carl tries to find Kenny, and then Michael, and then, finally, Toni. He learns that she is in the hospital. He calls Li and tells her that he will be home late, as he needs to look for Eagle (or Kenny) at The Camelot.

**Chapter 20 – The Calvary is Here**

Lori tells Michael the whole story. She tells Michael that Eagle has been abusive to her and details some of that abuse. She tells him what Eagle told her about the murder. Lori explains that Eagle revealed everything to her after the police talked to him, but then beat her up to scare her into silence.

Lori ran away with Troy and the knife, the murder weapon, which she hands to Michael. Eagle and Kenny suddenly appear at the Camelot. Michael faces off with Eagle. Carl arrives and arrests both Eagle and Kenny.

**Chapter 21 – Mist in the Late Morning Sun**

It's a year later. Michael and Carl are playing golf, as they do every week. Michael tells us that the weekly golf matches are a source of emotional stability for him.

We learn the fate of those involved with the murder. We learn that Michael, Toni, Lori and Troy are all living together, and that Michael now drives a truck up and down I-5 for a living.

Michael still doesn't understand what Jeff's life and death at the Camelot meant, but those who were in Jeff's life have renewed his spirit and brought him hope for the future.

## Sample Chapters

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### **Thirty Days in Camelot (Chapters 1 & 2)** **By Gary Campanella**

#### **Chapter 1: Cottonwood** **5233 words**

I woke up from a dead and dreamless sleep and carefully felt around for anything that might be a rattlesnake. My eyes stayed closed for fear that blinking could trigger a strike from one that might be coiled near me. As my other senses engaged I slowly eased my concern, but in the process felt the aches and pains of sleeping deeply on hard ground. I opened my eyes and stared motionless at small heart-shaped leaves above me, shading me. They were light green, tough and hard, with serrated edges that almost rattled in the light steady breeze that blew through the uppermost branches. The trunk was light gray, split at the base before rising high and then spreading in a full canopy, kind of like fireworks. The tree was blooming white flowers that hung in strings with what looked like tufts of disgorged insulation in the center. It was a cottonwood tree, and it shaded me from the early morning sun of the Mojave Desert, where I lay somewhat lost, somewhere north of Barstow. I had been sleeping in a ravine-like

wash, wrapped in two thin cotton blankets that I bought for about \$5, without haggling, during my honeymoon in Mexico, years before.

From this place I lifted my head and could see the cottonwood, some cactus, two alert and hungry lizards, and the flying insects who evaded them, accidentally or on purpose, who can tell. My first coherent thought that morning, really only semi-coherent, was that the circle of life seemed tragic and sad and cruel. The rocky ground beside me sloped up and out into the open desert. It was a lot to see, but not particularly orienting, and so I creakily sat up and wrapped the thin blankets tightly around my shoulders. I had been sleeping very deeply. I looked carefully at the hard, cracked bark of the tree and followed the lines of fissures and knots back up to the leaves and upper branches. I decided to lay back down, holding off the day a little longer, staring up at the tree and a careless blue sky above.

Though the air around me was mostly still there was a steady breeze causing a minor stir in the higher branches. Small birds chirped and flew here and there, landing on the upper branches, flying away, chattering, and conducting bird business. About thirty feet away, an old metal pipe jutted horizontally out of the side of the gully near the base of the trees. Water trickled slow and steady from the pipe and down into a weather-worn porcelain, claw foot bathtub, overflowing it so that the tub was always full and the water in it was always sort of fresh. The water poured off the foot end like from a giant measuring cup onto the ravine floor, forming a small swampy area beneath the tub and a wide grassy meadow spreading out and around it. The tree grew from there, and the insects, birds and snakes (and a few tortoise I'm sure) lived there too. The gully flowed down and away and petered itself out in the sandy wash. The Mojave Desert, awesome and awful, was everywhere else. My old pick-up truck was

parked about a hundred yards away on the trail above the gully. And a girl, about twenty years old, slept in my sleeping bag in a small grassy meadow that grew up and away from the swampy area made by the overfilled bathtub.

My name is Michael Milano. When I was a kid, and even into my twenties, my friends called me Milk Chocolate Milano, which was often shortened to just Chocolate, which was sometimes lengthened to White Chocolate, which stuck through much of high school and a little bit after. It's been more than 20 years since anyone has called me that.

It was an early morning in early summer and there was a chill in the air, but I could tell that it was already hot out of the ravine, up on the desert floor. I finally stood up, still dressed in familiar jeans and flannel shirt, and stretched the sleep and unwelcome stiffness out of my familiar bones and muscles. My right knee was sore again and my back hurt more, it seemed, than the 42 years it carried. I stepped my bare feet carefully to the edge of the meadow and into the sunshine, soaking up heat like a lizard. The sky was cloudless. The breeze was warm, and the smells of the water and grasses drifted along it and took me suddenly back to summer days of long ago, a couple of lives ago, growing up in rural New England, far away from where I was. It took me back, actually, to a particular tall grass field next to the old water tower that separated the Walker's apple orchard from the land the Walker's sold to build the subdivision I grew up in. It took me back to that field on those days in the vivid and unemployed way that a day can begin with a daydream.

I remembered lying in those fields for hours, a year or two passed middle school, watching clouds perform their shape shifting tricks on the long summer vacation days of my childhood, America staggering through the 80's, my town reeling into and out of the 50's, and

me imprinting the smells and tastes and touch of those grasses and that tired, damp earth. It took me back, for whatever reason, to one day in particular, fifteen years old, when the Walker's daughter Diana stumbled over me in the tall grass, a white bowl of still green apples in her hands. She was 14. She had dirty blond hair, long, thin and wavy. She was tall and awkward, wore braces, and was not very popular in school. My friends and I, the new arrivals, like suburban colonists, saw her as a townie, a farm girl, and we teased her. We seldom made friends with her or any of the other townies. On that particular day she wore a white peasant shirt, popular then, and faded jeans. I can't remember if she was wearing shoes, but I prefer to remember her barefoot.

She tripped over me as I lay hidden in the grass, but didn't fall. She stopped short and jerked a few steps backwards like I was a rattlesnake. I had been daydreaming about baseball or cloud formations or something and so was also startled. I sat up fast, like a snake striking, and I saw the bowl tip and a few apples tumble and disappear into the grass.

She gathered herself and her apples and mumbled, "I'm sorry," before putting her head down and walking passed. And, in that split second, with all of my coiled up fifteen-year-old hormones released, I fell in love with her. I said nothing, of course, and let her walk away, leaving an apple or two behind, which I could have picked up for her but didn't think fast enough. It would not be the last time that I would fall in love on a look, in fact it became my thing for a while, and it would not be the last time that I would say nothing and let the object of my sudden affection walk away – that also would become my thing. I rationalized my silence by figuring that she would think I was teasing her if I had tried to speak with her, but I lashed myself with regret nonetheless. Later, when we passed in the gleaming new halls of the high

school built by and for us colonists, I smiled at her, even when I was with my friends, and sometimes she smiled back. I never teased her again. I also never spoke to her. Eventually she started wearing round, wire-rimmed glasses and became kind of tomboy pretty. She hung with a small circle of other townies. She never seemed to me to be very happy, and I certainly wasn't either. That was my imagined bond with her. That was the communion in the smiles we shared. Years later, her father's land sold up and transformed into cheap split-level houses on roads named after Ivy League colleges, I heard she moved to Florida with her family. The old farmhouse, about a half-mile from the water tower, still stands. I've been there twice in the last twenty years, both times on summer days.

So it was like that on that early summer morning in the desert when I tiptoed to my truck, the rocks moving from cool to warm as I climbed out of the ravine. I understood with sleepy strangeness the snake and the lizard and sensed the practicality of being cold-blooded in the desert. I was forty-two years old and middle age was coming hard and fast. I looked in the side mirror of the truck and saw my new beard, unkempt for the few weeks I had had it, and my hair, which I kept short, dirty and uncombed. There was a gray hair or two in my beard, and my eyes were puffy from outdoor sleep and disposable contact lenses left in for days.

I had gotten to this place by a jeep road that wound uphill along the wash for several miles. There were many rocks and at times the trail dipped low into the wash and the sand was deep and treacherous. It was very dry. I had made slow but determined progress to this place the night before, a red, big sky sunset flooding the truck cab.

The jeep road had trailed off from a gravel road I had followed from a county road for nearly thirty miles. From the county road, across the wide valley floor, under the hot desert

sun, I had seen the tree far in the distance, a solitary tree in the empty expanse. I decided I wanted to see it up close. I wanted to sit under it. I wanted to hear its leaves in the breeze. Such was my confusion and instability. Such was my knee-jerk reaction to the kind of weird coincidence in finding the girl in the first place. It was a choice I made more out of anger and frustration than curiosity. It was a choice I could control. The girl had been asleep in the passenger seat and didn't have a chance to object.

I felt stupid when I arrived. When I turned the wheel and rumbled off the main road towards it, I thought I was taking a quick twenty minute detour. But then twenty minutes passed and the tree didn't seem to be getting any closer, but the road I left seemed like it was a long way away and I could barely see it. The dirt road initially got very sandy and I thought I would be turning around or getting stuck in twenty minutes. I wondered if I did get stuck if getting out of it would be similar to getting out of a snow bank, which I was ok at. Then the road got more solid and rocky, which must have meant that I had gone up hill a bit, but I didn't recall doing so. Soon the rocky, bumpy path settled into two pretty well worn jeep tracks. All the way there had been no easy place to turn around, and so the patch of least resistance was to press on, which I did. I checked my gas and it was fine. I checked the girl and she was still dozing. I stayed focused on that single tree standing like one of the windmills that dotted the horizon. Whatever spark initially captivated me about it failed with the daylight, and so soon what drove me on was that it seemed stupid to turn around and go back after all of this without at least seeing it. The girl stirred a bit in the truck and I began to fret like a little lap dog that if she woke up she would think I was taking her to the desert to rape and kill her, which of course I wasn't, but I hadn't been thinking about her perspective at all until then. If I had I

would have stayed on the main road and marveled at the lonely tree from a distance. I would have nodded at it from a distance in silent communion. I would have found a town with a well-lit Motel 6 or Super 8 and a few fast food restaurants and got her fed and comfortable.

Instead, I pressed on. My hands pressed hard on the steering wheel I had turned, getting further and further away from the sensible road for a reason that was slipping away as quickly as the daylight.

I reached it just before sunset. I parked a few feet above the little ravine it stood in and watched the sun set and felt the cooling air from the tailgate of my pick-up truck. It was nice, but I still felt stupid, and I worked over in my mind what I would say to the girl when she woke up. I walked around for a few minutes. I enjoyed the silence and the space and the darkening sky, like the tree has done every day before and since. I then surrendered to the somewhat ridiculous mini-fate I had created for ourselves, and decided that an open camp in the desert was the right thing to do. When I returned to the cab she was partly awake, staring straight ahead. I told her, and she seemed to hear, but, fortunately I think, she barely woke up, barely looked around, barely acknowledged my hastily set up campsite and the sleeping bag I gave her. She threw me a look which I took as disdain, which I took as confirmation that this whole situation was idiotic, and got into the bag without a word. It was dark by then and I don't know how quickly she fell back asleep, but I myself stayed awake for a long time, most of the night. I watched the first star appear, then another and another. I lost count long before they reached the billion number that it seemed I could see. Confronted with the darkness, with only a sliver of a moon, I was more than a little spooked by the idea of wild animals or rattlesnakes coming to kill us. Mostly I was just reflecting on what a fuck up I was.

I read a story in a magazine once about a guy who had gone searching for some kind of spiritual awakening in this desert. He had driven for miles over road-less desert until his car got stuck in a sandy ravine. His tires just spun. He had water and a little food and a few lines drawn on a cocktail napkin that some stranger in a local bar said would lead him to an abandoned mine that would hold the secret he sought. The story was written in the early seventies and the Mojave Desert was still alive with the weird and unexplained. Carlos Castaneda was chewing peyote nearby, and Hell's Angels were hiding out like Pancho Villa had sixty years before. The guy didn't panic, but sat by his car without thinking or moving much for three days. On the fourth day he started the car and drove it straight out of the ravine, time having shifted the sands in a favorable way. He drove further, following the lines on the map. At one point he came to a flat valley floor, hard packed with salty dirt, and he noticed he didn't need to steer, or even keep his foot on the gas pedal. At one point he got out of his car and walked along beside it. At sunset he lost the trail of the lines on his map and figured he'd arrived. He walked over to some jagged hills where a mine could have been, found dried mesquite and built a small fire. He sat by it until dark, until he fell asleep. He dreamed of flying carpets and of dust devils turning into Jinn, warning him that danger lay ahead. When he awoke there was a Native American woman (of course!) stroking his hair, comforting him. She gave him bread and roasted the meat of an animal that he couldn't identify. She tore pieces of the small carcass with her hands and fed him. She smiled but never said a word to him, gave him a small clay cup, and motioned for him to drink the spiced honey mixture inside. Soon he fell into a long dreamless sleep and woke up energized and alone. Even the remnants of the

fire were gone. Strangely satisfied, he walked back to his car and returned to the city from where he had come. The map had been true, his quest fulfilled.

That story has always stuck with me. It was the only story I've ever found by its author, and it's what I think of now when I remember seeing the cottonwood tree in the distance. At any other time in my life, certainly before and probably since, I would have been driving on that county road, seen that tree, and not had a second thought. That time, though, I did, and the second thought was "why the fuck not." So I did it. I turned the wheel. I had nowhere to be and there was no one to stop me. The girl, like I said, was asleep in the passenger seat, and I doubt she would have cared either way. It was only supposed to be a quick detour.

I had picked up the girl in the gas station-diner-post office that was the town of Cottonwood, California. She was leaning against a fence post by the state road in loose yellow shorts and a plain white T-shirt, hitchhiking. She was Mexican, with long, thick brown hair and an oval face hardened more by fear and determination than experience. She had dark eyes and was very pretty. A faded red-white-and-blue nylon gym bag, with the word Kodak written on the white side panel in gold, above the Olympic symbol, sat by her feet. I had seen it before.

Her name was Toni, short for Antonietta and she was my dead brother's girlfriend. I'd met her once before, more than a year ago, when Jeff brought her back East to see our mother, minutes before she died. We were in Massachusetts General Hospital, the only hospital our mother would allow herself to be taken to. She was transferred there by the so-called convalescent home we put her in when my wife and I couldn't take care of her any more. She'd steadily worsened there until the pain got so bad that they put her on a morphine drip. Then she mostly slept. My wife or I came more often then, mostly every day. We watched her sleep.

She faded away quickly then. Her skin got yellow, her smell sour. Her smile was thin and her eyes didn't really fix on you anymore. She seemed vaguely distracted, preoccupied, like I'm sure she was, with pain, and with dying. One of my memories of her being all there was a Saturday afternoon. I was reading a book in a chair by the side of her bed and Gail was sitting in a chair by the foot of the bed doing something on her phone. She had been out of it for a couple of days, but she suddenly woke up, sat up, looked down at her IV and then up at the bag of morphine attached and said, "Oh, this isn't good." I assured her that it was fine, a lie she certainly saw through, then just as suddenly look tired and lay back down and back to sleep.

My wife, Gail, and I were barely talking then. After the nursing home, which she had insisted upon and which she was right about, we settled in to separate routines of working, visiting the home, making separate dinners, and sleeping in various rooms. When we did talk, we talked about errands, or bills, or how my mom looked that day, or what a nurse or doctor said, or who called, or what was on TV. We were grieving, angry, numb, and we both a little bit shocked to learn that we didn't really have each other to lean on. I think we thought of ourselves as people who would come together and be stronger in times of crisis. But we didn't, and we weren't. Instead we watched my mother, closer really to Gail than I, fight the cancer, lose, give up, and fade to black. And we were paralyzed by it, shamed by it, also beaten by it. I spent a lot of time alone, watching TV, sleeping in front of the TV, the TV watching me.

When her breathing failed they rushed her to the hospital, put her on the machine and told us to expect the worst. It was December, two weeks before Christmas. Gail and I went home to our house with the undecorated Christmas tree, and talked about the breathing machine. Turn it off or keep it on. We fought. She wanted it turned off. I wanted it on, at

least until Jeff could fly out and say goodbye. Jeff lived in California. Jeff had not been out to visit since the cancer started, more than a year before. Jeff had only seen Gail a handful of times and they'd never warmed up to each other. Gail figured that Jeff didn't deserve the chance, not at my mother's expense. She was probably right.

I disagreed.

I won.

She went to bed and I called Jeff, late at night even on the West, and told him. He'd been waiting for the call. Not that night, but for weeks. I knew this, and I also knew without having to ask and without his having to explain, why he hadn't been there. Such is the shared knowledge of family, of blood, the mystery that I couldn't waste my time trying to explain, not to Gail, not then anyway. My mom knew this too. "That's Jeff," she'd said when she could still talk, forgiving him. Gail had not been as forgiving, badmouthing him frequently as my mom went downhill, then and up and finally down forever. She didn't think I should have been forgiving either. I was, though maybe I shouldn't have been.

She also didn't think he'd come at the end, though I knew he would, which he did, four days later. That night, the night the doctors said my mother was as good as dead and I should turn off the machine, I hung up the phone with Jeff and paced the dark house for hours. Gail was sleeping. Near dawn I watched a rerun of some old cop show on TV and cried, stupidly, at the sadness of it all.

I picked Jeff up at Logan Airport on a cold December morning, steam in the air, the city's smells and sounds hanging low to the ground. The sky above as we drove along the highway ramp was a frigid royal blue. Before the road dipped down into the tunnel you could see the

harbor, frozen it seemed but for white caps, and the dingy city gleaming in the icy sun. Toni was with him, the first I'd heard of her, though they'd lived together for a year. Jeff was 38, three years younger than me. Toni was much younger. They were dressed for an LA winter and even inside the terminal, near baggage claim where I met them, they were freezing and disheveled from the red eye flight through Pittsburgh. Jeff and I shook hands, embraced, said little. Toni said nothing, looking shy and worried for Jeff. I liked her. Gail, who was at the hospital waiting for us, was teamed with the nurses and doctors against us now, waiting for us to stop indulging ourselves so that they could get the deed done. Gail immediately did not like Toni. She didn't say anything, but I could tell the way she looked passed her, or at her when she thought that no one was watching.

We went straight from the airport, through the tunnel to the hospital and straight up to the room. Jeff was not prepared. He staggered. Toni caught him, and he leaned against the wall, couldn't take his eyes off her, knew for the first time I think, that it was really happening. His mother was dying.

"How long?" he asked me, his voice a whisper, barely audible.

"Not long once they shut the respirator off."

"Does dad know?"

"He knows enough. I'll call him when it's over."

"Where is he anyway?"

"This time of year? The house in Florida. I haven't talked with him in a few weeks though."

He looked back at his mother. He was far more of a mama's boy than I, though most people thought the opposite. Most people thought that when Jeff left town he was abandoning our mother, that he was siding with our father, that he was blaming her for whatever might have gone wrong with his childhood. Certainly our mother did nothing to dispel that. She definitely felt abandoned by Jeff, though I'd have been shocked to hear her express such a thought. She *acted* hurt. But what people didn't understand was that she wasn't hurt, not that Jeff left. She simply missed him. He was her favorite. He was probably her favorite person, period. And what people didn't understand about Jeff was that he had to get out and make his way in the world precisely *because* he was so devoted to his mother. Watching out for her, in his subtle, standing by the door, style, was holding him back and stifling him. And he never got over his guilt for moving away, for leaving home, for leaving her.

"When do we shut it off?" He asked. He had been quiet for several minutes. The heater buzzed and hissed as hot air was forced into the room, creating a stifling humidity. There was no one in the extra bed in the room, which Toni sat on, and the room was ringed with medical equipment, mostly turned off, except for the respirator, and covered with fitted sheets of vinyl, like they'd put her in a supply room.

"Whenever you're ready," I said.

"I'm ready," he said. And he meant it.

I left Jeff and Toni alone with our mother for the last time. I didn't kiss her or say goodbye. I had done these things already. So had Gail, who met me in the hall, irritated, "Well?"

"Tell them we're ready."

“OK,” she said, her eyes going soft. She grabbed the two little fingers of my left hand and squeezed, our most tender gesture in weeks.

The nurses came and went into the room, and Jeff and Toni came out. They were both crying. Jeff composed himself and walked up to Gail and gave her a quick embrace. He stepped back. “This is Toni,” he said, moved and proud.

Gail, my wife and companion for seven years and, as it turned out, virtual stranger, looked my brother Jeff straight in the eye and said, “She looks twelve, Jeff.”

Jeff stiffened, met her gaze, stepped back from it.

I said, “Jesus, Gail.”

She turned to me, turned on me, said, “Go to hell,” and walked down the hallway, away from the room.

Jeff turned, his arm around Toni, and walked passed me, passed the room, out of the ward and out of the hospital. In the coming days he didn’t answer his phone and he didn’t show for the funeral. My wife never forgave him for that. I’m not sure I ever did either, but I also never forgave her for that comment, at that time and place, her grief be damned. I sat in the hallway alone while my mother expired. It took hours, but I couldn’t bring myself to go back in the room. It was nearly dawn when the nurse I’d been seeing all night, a woman about my age, Jamaican, heavier than me but who moved across the hallway with grace and purpose, with a calm urgency, finally spoke to me. I had been watching her coming and going for hours, before Gail stormed out, before Jeff and Toni came and went. She went to my mother’s room, to other rooms, to the oval station that the nurses used as home base. There were other nurses too, and various orderlies and maintenance people, and even an occasional

doctor, but it was this one nurse who I mostly watched. Her first name was Florence, I remember that, and the last time I saw her she walked straight down the hall to where I was slumped in a chair. She paused for a second while I met her gaze, then took a deep breath and sat down next to me. She said only, "Your mother has passed." Then she waited and watched me for my response. *Your mother has passed.* The words echoed in my ears, even now, and I couldn't help thinking what a strange and singular moment hearing that phrase is in a person's life.

I had looked away when she said it, but then I returned my gaze to her eyes, which were softer than I remembered from a minute earlier, more sympathetic than I expected, and I said, "Thank you."

I don't remember who then got up first, but I'm guessing it was her. I made my way to the room, which was empty, and I kissed my mother on the forehead, told her I loved her, and told her I was proud to be her son. I left the room and found Gail crying in the chapel. I put my arm around her, led her outside, ushered her into the cold car and later drove her home.

Within a month we were fighting. About anything and everything. About not making enough money and buying the wrong kind of milk. The distance and silence of the previous few months crashed around us, deafened us to each other's pleas for peace. I got mean, pathetic, and stupid. I couldn't deal with my mother gone, my brother far away and not talking, my wife a stranger. I blamed her, hated her, hated my mother, Jeff, myself. I picked fight after fight until she finally left me. It took half a year and then another year for my anger to pass, and in all that time I hadn't talked to her very much or very well. We were not divorced, had not even

filed. We had both suggested marriage counselling, but never at the same time and so we had never gone. I thought she pitied me, which was why I avoided her.

And so she was gone.

And then Jeff was gone too, stabbed in the heart by person or persons unknown. And there was his girl, Toni, who I'd come out to find, who I'd come out to ask, "What happened?" and maybe, "what was he like, my brother?"

She was over there sleeping when I woke up.

## Chapter 2: Spain

### 5616 words

She was hitchhiking on the gravelly roadside, across from a truck stop, when I slid my truck down the exit ramp of a two-lane state freeway that straight-line connected one random point on the map to another. It was midmorning and nearly 100 degrees. There was a steady warm wind, more than a breeze, which felt like a giant oven exhaust had been left on somewhere. Flags flapped unfurled above the truck stop. I pumped gas in the shade under a roof and marveled at the diorama-like feel of all that lay before me. There was the hot, alligator-cracked, sandy asphalt just beyond the shade of the gas pumps. There was Toni across the road in the sun, and there was the desert, wide and flat and open just beyond her. It was strange to think that I could step out of the familiar cab of my truck and then, if I wanted to, take a few more steps beyond the invisible border of the gas pumps and actually be part of that landscape. It felt like I would be walking into a display at a natural history museum.

So I didn't. I bought the gas and went inside the diner and ate lunch and watched her from the window. After a while she sat on a large rock, her feet on the bag I'd seen before. Her face stayed expressionless and hard. Her thumb didn't seem to care if a car stopped or not. I watched her while I ate a tuna sandwich, even though I knew she might get a ride, even though I knew that a girl that pretty wouldn't be sitting at the side of the road for long.

Finding her at all in that one-horse-town, let alone finding her on the side of the road as I drove into town, was either a really weird stroke of luck or a foregone conclusion. It was probably both. The town was not very much larger than the exit ramp itself, so the odds of running into her somewhere there were not very long, but it was pretty surreal, like the desert

itself, and it did feel like more than luck. Three weeks earlier, when I'd gotten the call from Detective Carl of the LAPD that Jeff was dead, I had asked about her and was told, "She has a brother in Cottonwood. I think she went there." I spent a week trying to reach her at the apartment she'd shared with Jeff before heading out there on my own. Cottonwood, a small collection of lines on Google maps that resembled a hash tag was my only lead.

And there she was.

And so I sat there, dumbstruck, watching her, remembering her, placing her here in her natural heat, and not as the fish out of water I'd met just once in the Boston winter. I watched her, remembering Jeff, as if she were a part of Jeff, which really she was to me. And I watched her, scared to approach her, like I'd be scared to approach a ghost.

Just a few weeks earlier, when I learned that Jeff was dead, my first thought that wasn't about Jeff, or me, was of Toni and how that lost look in the Boston hospital might be translated to wherever she was right then. I was numb all that day of course, I would be for many more, but I also had this unsettling feeling that someone was following me, like someone was just behind me. I kept turning around and mistaking street signs and fire hydrants for people staring at me. I couldn't help but wonder if maybe it was Jeff who was following me, though I couldn't really imagine why, and it didn't really feel like him. If Jeff were some kind of ghost, which would not be something I believed in, I pictured him wandering along Sunset Boulevard, near where he'd been killed, probably window shopping or people watching, or trying to find his way back home.

A few years before I was called for jury duty. I waited all morning while other jurors were called into courtrooms to meet their jury fates, while I just waited. I was finally called just

before noon and told to report to a different courthouse after lunch, way across town. I was offered driving directions or bus fare, and decided to take the bus, Boston traffic being what it was. The journey was long and circuitous, involving transfers and intermittent waiting. And as I meandered slowly across town I became aware of the worn out patience of the other daytime bus riders. No one was in a hurry because there was no way to be in a hurry. There were headphones and books and resignation on the mid-day busses. There was an existential limbo that's similar to what my impression of the suddenly dead, including Jeff, must encounter after dying, if there's any encountering at all. And so on the day that I found out that Jeff had suddenly died I thought about the mid-day bus riders, and it didn't feel like Jeff was following me, just that someone was. And it felt like that someone was trying to get my attention, like they had a message for me, though I never got any message. It was the same feeling that hit me when I saw Toni hitchhiking; only it felt like the message had been finally delivered.

I left half of the sandwich and climbed back into my truck and drove, slowly, across and out of the parking lot and over to where she sat. I leaned over and rolled down the passenger side window. She looked up but remained otherwise still. I watched her face carefully for a sign that she knew me, remembered me. I got nothing, nothing I could use, nothing but hardness. She appeared to have more pride than judgment, more mission than statement, or maybe it was desperation I glimpsed in her stare. She was after all a woman in the middle of absolutely nowhere, hitchhiking, heading for God knew where, her boyfriend dead.

When I said, "Toni, where are you going?"

She looked me in the eye, maybe recognizing me, and said, "Spain."

A little later I was pretty sure she knew me, despite her silence, only because she fell asleep in the cab. Later still I was sure she knew me when we reached the little oasis by the tree and I said to her, "I thought we could camp out here," and she looked at me and said nothing, but grabbed the blanket she'd curled up in and walked down to the grassy stretch and sat. I set up the campsite and gave her my sleeping bag. I watched her fall asleep without dinner, like we were sort of family, which we were. Sort of.

Still, when I woke up the next morning, the strangeness of the girl and the place pushed me off balance, and I'd tiptoed to my truck in bare feet and peeked at myself in the driver's side mirror, trying to ground myself a little. Eventually I walked back down to the camp and sat cross-legged in the grass under the tree and watched the sun climb higher over the desert. I had no plans to move. *Fuck everything*, I thought. *This goddamn tree is my tree. I claim it for everything I've lost and for the nothing I have.*

From my sheltered spot in the gully I saw only the daily traffic that came and went through the little oasis, up and down the wash. Small lizards darted from rock to rock, froze a moment, and sped away. A hummingbird nosed around a thorny blossom. Sparrows did their thing in the trees, always noisy, and the wind off the desert, tempered in this rut, rustled the leaves of the trees and hissed through the spring-sweetened grasses. I was not meditating, have never meditated, but I got myself relaxed and still and I tried to stay that way, taking in as much of the happenings around me as I effortlessly could. I guess I was waiting for a sign. I noticed what might have been coyote tracks in the muddy area near the tub, and I spied some kind of rusted machinery half buried in the tall grass down the wash. I noticed the air, cleaner and sweeter here, filtered through the water and pollen, and sheltered from the dust sweeping

across the open chaparral. I tried and failed to get inside the minds of the many little lizards all around. They moved too fast, even in their stillness. Strangely, I thought they might be good to eat. Way overhead in the cloudless sky I saw a raven make long loping circles around my horizon. It was so high that my oasis must have looked to it like a green smudge, I thought, though probably more like a target.

With my cooking pot in hand I scooped some water from the tub and brewed some tea on my camp stove. The noise from the stove distracted me, broke the spell, dropped my thoughts down and back to the here and now, to my tasks and troubles. Soon the water boiled, the tea steeped, and I settled back down on my blanket under the tree. I checked on Toni. She remained sleeping, peacefully, quietly, deep into the day now, and my thoughts drifted back, seeking no connections, and forward, with no direction. I daydreamed. I remembered girls and women I have loved. I recalled with inattention various victories, defeats, challenges, and boredoms. I thought of my brother, dead three weeks now, and the strangeness of my path since then, leading me to this unknown place with this strange and sleeping and mostly unknown companion. Vaguely I dreamed of the future, tromping the earth in my fifties, tromping the earth in my sixties. These were stances really, snapshots without cause and effect, just a series of singular, crystallized moments to feel my way towards, like the one in which I'm chopping wood by a newly built cabin on some vacant land I own in Maine. How I got there and what I was doing there I didn't divine, didn't care to divine. I just saw myself there, in that moment, in some future.

I drifted in and out of these daydreams, mixing my mind and the wind, feeding from and into that place where I sat, like the sound of the trees and my fleeting vision of Diana Walker by the water tank.

Hours passed and Toni still slept. I thought only, *she must have been tired*. I stayed alone with my thoughts and that place. Behind me, at one point, I heard the distinct sound of a creaky door opening. Again, like someone was following me. I turned, but there was nothing there but the rocky hill leading up to the open desert. I received no vision or additional message. Was I finally going nuts? I felt the million eyes from my life and heard the thousand voices gradually beginning to fade away. Implicitly, it seemed, I knew they would take longer to recede completely, longer to back them off, like villagers before a spectacle too awful to understand, or like pedestrians around a bloody traffic accident, or like a rattler retreating from your boots to its lair of sage root and rock. I knew it would take some time – some non-time really – to erase my grief, my desire and my self-consciousness, to achieve a silence in my head – and yet that, it seemed, was my goal out there, to get it done right. In some way, for some reason, I had steered to that tree in the desert to stop the slide, at least for a minute. I had spent three weeks acting and reacting on impulse, and things weren't easing up. Picking up Toni, in fact, sent things spinning faster. I was overwhelmed. I turned the wheel, went off the road to slow the spin, to ask myself, *what am I doing?* and maybe, *what have I done?* before getting on with the question at hand, which was, *what happened to Jeff?* Like a man being called to the carpet, I was in no hurry for that one.

And then there was the sunset. I'd once been a fan of sunsets. As a boy I watched them regularly, studied them carefully. I watched the clouds ooze and transform and the colors

change and smear across the sky. I watched the sun sink, and I timed the sun from its first contact with the horizon to its last sparkle, about seven minutes I think. I knew sunsets, knew their types and sizes and tendencies. Had my favorites.

Then I forgot about them. I got busy. The sun rose and set without my attendance, without my monitoring or rating, and I began to forget. I realized that had happened one night shortly after my mother died. I left my downtown Boston job and walked without direction to a waterfront park for a hot dog and realized that it had been years since I'd watched an entire sunset. I stayed for part of that one, recalling others and lamenting a little those I'd missed, and then a few weeks later I walked down for another, stayed a little longer, and so on. Soon I was watching winter sunsets, looking forward to them, and making time for them. My wife didn't understand. Nor should she have. It was a brooding thing, and it was bad news for us.

So it was with expectation, and a degree of formality, that as the sunset began that day in the desert, I put on boots and carefully and deliberately foraged along the gully rim for decaying shrub, pausing to smoke cigarettes at various vantage points and returning several times to the campsite with armfuls of desert driftwood. I built a fireplace on the edge of the grass away from the trees. I set the spark in the gathering dusk and breathed the fire to life. When I looked up I noticed Toni was finally awake. I continued my slow work by preparing two seats and a crude table around the fire. Silent and otherwise motionless, her eyes followed me around the campsite.

I met her gaze and smiled. "You're safe," I said. "We'll sleep here tonight, be on the road tomorrow." Then I said, "keep using the sleeping bag. These blankets are working fine for me."

The kindling crackled, hissed, and smoked itself into a respectable blaze. I began to add a few larger pieces. Everyone thinks they know how to make a fire, and so do I, and in the end it's always easier than it seems. Wood burns. Still, it's very much like driving a car: I am certain I do it better than most other people.

And so, a little proud, I went up to the truck and retrieved two cans of refried beans, a package of hot dogs, a jar of salsa and some other supplies I still had from my log drive West, camping in the Great Smokies, the Ozark, and on the New Mexico plains. I cut the meat and cooked everything together in a cast iron skillet I bought at a hardware store in Oklahoma. I added a little salsa for flavor. I opened two beers and offered her one. She stretched a thin, bare, brown arm – a strong arm – from the sleeping bag and accepted it silently. She sat up slowly, the sleeping bag still at her waist. She took a long and deep drink from the can.

“How are you doing?” I asked. She did not answer.

Suit yourself, I thought. I'd been silent for years myself. I resumed my duties over the fire, judged the slop to be finished, and scooped healthy portions onto two plates I had laid on the plastic mat I'd used for a table. I walked to where she sat and offered her one. She took it carefully and began to eat. I returned to my seat by the fire and began to eat, tending the fire and watching for the first few stars. I sat facing her, the fire between us, but only looked over occasionally. After my long day of long silence I was inviting, but not insisting, on conversation. The tree glowed orange and slipped into silhouette.

“Thank you,” she said, standing over me with the empty plate. I smiled and nodded. The fire reflected off her face and the wind touched her hair in places. She looked cold. She

was very pretty, not so hard up close, in firelight. I took the plate and she folded her arms and leaned into the fire.

“Why not sit by the fire?” I asked, and I picked up the folded blanket next to me and offered it to her.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” she said. I nodded and rummaged around for the roll of toilet paper I’d kept by my side for napkins.

“Here,” I said, “You should walk down that way. It’s sandy. Don’t worry, there’s nothing out there.”

I fed the fire more wood. I was a little surprised again, like the first time we’d met, that her accent sounded more Californian than Mexican. She was definitely raised here. She returned a few moments later and tentatively picked up the blanket, wrapped it around her shoulders, and sat a few feet away, part way around the fire.

She said nothing for awhile. We both stared the fire. I’d read somewhere that some American Indian languages have a word for this, which roughly means becoming “one” with the fire. For no particular reason, I told her this. Then she began to talk: “Why are we out here?” Her tone seemed faintly accusatory, like I might be up to no good, but not really. I couldn’t and didn’t judge it very well. In hindsight, knowing her, I’m pretty sure that she was accusing me of being a screw up.

I answered, “Nothing really. I just wanted to drop out of sight for a little bit.” This was less honest than “I have no idea,” but less alarming as well.

She didn’t answer. She just returned to staring at the fire and I wasn’t sure if she was considering my answer or dismissing it. I made a play for honesty. I said, “I came here to find

you. I came out here to find out what happened to Jeff, and now that I found you I don't really know what to do next." She looked up at me, listening, I could see, as the firelight flickered across her face, and so I went on, "What are you gonna do next?"

She turned back to the fire for an instant, then looked directly at me and said, "I don't want to live." She added, "And I know I'm going to die a horrible death."

I answered quickly, "No. You're not." It sounded unconvincing and I was conscious of not looking up and meeting her gaze which I was sure she had fixed upon me, challenging me to challenge her announcement. I added only, "Why do you think so?"

She didn't answer right away and I looked up at the sky, which had turned a deep and royal blue but wasn't quite dark yet. Only a few stars were shining. She said, "I'm too wild," not in answer but as if I'd said nothing at all. "Sometimes I just go off. I piss people off too much. Not on purpose. It just seems to happen. Jeff used to say that if people were gonna be firecrackers then I'd light their matches." As she spoke she seemed to come alive. She leaned up and forward. Her reserve and composure switched from caution and indifference to a kind of anger, a kind of aggression. I looked at her now, the fire glowing orange and yellow on her face, and she looked up and met my gaze and suddenly I knew her. Knew what Jeff saw in her. I sensed there was stuff in her past, sensed the strength she daily summoned, sensed even the way she probably made love. She looked up and met my gaze and I suddenly knew her like a friend or a lover or a relative, like someone I had a history with, like I sensed I would, like in a parallel sense I did.

"No," I said, "Don't worry. You'll get through this. You just need time."

"No," she said, "I'm going to die. I know it now. I do. And you know what? I'll be glad when it happens."

"That's silly," I said, "It won't happen. You'll see the situation coming, this horrible death coming, and you'll head it off. You may think you don't care about life, but I bet you care even less about death."

Even as I said that I knew I was rationalizing. I knew I wasn't even sure exactly what I was trying to pep talk her out of. She stiffened her back. I could see her stubbornness. She was annoyed: "No, I don't. Don't tell me how to feel. I don't care at all about living. I'm tired of living. I'll come to that do or die point and I'll step over the line. I want to. I can almost see it. I can almost see the asshole who will kill me."

I exhaled, sighed. "Oh well," I said, giving her the point. I reached over and stacked more dead branches on the fire. The wood was getting low, which was a more immediate thing to fret about. I wasn't sure what to say. I didn't want to get pigeonholed into trying to talk her out of this vision, to devalue her words or mine in predictability, but I really didn't know exactly what she was talking about. I didn't know what exactly she'd been through since that night, or on that night, and I really didn't think I should ask. Not yet. She was grieving, I thought, that's all. I wanted to explain to her the thing I couldn't explain, the thing I knew she was missing, and yet I myself didn't know what that was. I sensed that she wanted me to argue with her, and I could feel that I wanted to argue back, but the subject was too big, and the moment had come too fast. I wanted to say more than just, "no you're not," but I couldn't think straight.

Suddenly the strangeness of the whole situation hit me. What was I doing out here? Why had I quit my job and withdrawn my savings and undertaken this sideways, close the barn door after

the horse has gone, search for my dead brother? My brother. What the hell had happened to him? What did Toni know? I had many more questions than answers or arguments or words.

The fire roared to life. I smiled. I was proud of my fire, and I was cautiously enjoying this strange girl and her darkness. I was also enjoying the scariness, exhilaration, and oozing in freedom of cutting myself loose, of being on this adventure. It did not feel like a vacation. Far different, in fact. Since I carried no return ticket in my pocket. And the scariness and excitement was different than the scariness and excitement of the corporate retreats I was used to attending. Corporate retreats on which we swung on trapezes with harnesses, spotters and safety nets and later, more daringly, drank and sang karaoke with co-workers. This had a completely different feel. It was “without a net” and, in a strange way, it was less scary. Swinging on trapezes to worship the god of team building had a rush to it, but it was a staged rush. We talked about it, rehearsed it, checked and double-checked our harnesses and safety nets, signed a release, and were guided in every movement by a friendly instructor. The risks were in falling funny or, worse, in looking like an idiot or screaming like a girl. This campsite in the desert was less like I was risking my life for something stupid, and more like I had more control of any risks I was taking. I had chosen to turn off the road, for instance, and not because I in any way was supposed to. And once I did, the risks were in taking this jeep rut or that one, or jumping out of my blankets before checking for rattlers. It was very strange and foreign for me, a guy who had never even been unemployed, who’d gone from elementary school to high school to college to work; a guy who stayed on the path, placed one foot in front of the other. I thought of a time as a boy, maybe eight or nine years old, on a rare trip with my dad. We were on a boat, somewhere off the New England shore, and my father cajoled and

badgered me into jumping off the anchored boat into the open ocean. I remember the blue water, deeper than I could imagine and gently rolling, and the shore seeming far, far away. I couldn't swim and my bony knees were shaking as I perched myself on the boat stairs and tried to weather the storm of encouragement to jump from my father into the water below. I was convinced that he was making a grave error, that he was unwittingly urging me to jump to my death, but, scared to the point of my legs giving out, I finally jumped anyway, of my own choice – opting out of the safer course and secret delight of retreating to the boat's interior, and the solace of my mother's embrace, and failure in the eyes of my stern father. On that day, on for maybe the last time until that trip to the desert, I jumped – and I floated!

At first I couldn't believe my luck at surviving, then I grew giddy, played with kicking my feet and moving my arms, got a little out of control and recovered myself before I swallowed too much water, before the panic monster lurking behind the door could push its way in.

This is what I thought of then, by the fire in the desert, spooked again by the longest lasting lesson from it all: that I never did become much of a swimmer. This is what it felt like then. Eventually I got up from the fire and found my way to the truck's cooler and got us each another can of beer. I opened two and gave her one.

"You know," I said, "Maybe. Maybe you're right. Maybe you know what you're headed for. But isn't that right now? Can't it change? I mean, isn't tomorrow another day?"

"Maybe. I guess. But I don't really want to change anymore. I'm tired of it. I just want to keep on getting on with it. I'm tired of people telling me that everything will be all right and I'm tired of people trying to stop me. The only way they'll stop me is to kill me. No one will ever trap me. I mean I don't want to get tortured to death or anything like that, but I think it

will definitely be violent. And I'll tell you something else, whoever tries it better be good at it, or I'll be the one that does the killing."

"I think I believe that."

She gulped her beer, happy with making her point. She said, "I don't ever want to get old."

"How old is old?" I asked.

"I don't know. Maybe fifty. I figure if I'm still going when I'm fifty then I'm out of here. See ya later. I used to work in a convalescent home, and I don't ever want to be like that. I'd rather be dead."

"Well, you know, a lot of people are active into their eighties." I was arguing with her again.

"I don't care. Fifty is plenty long enough for me. Too long."

"But aren't there things you want to do? You could do anything you want."

The only light now was the firelight. Overhead there were a million stars. She stared into the fire hard. I looked up. She was distracted. She said softly, almost hopefully, "I'd like to go to Spain."

"There you go. Why?"

"I don't know," she said. "It seems like a good place to go."

"Do you speak Spanish?"

"A little. Not enough."

"Well you can go to Spain, you know. You can do anything."

She laughed and looked right at me. "Easy for you to say."

"What do you mean?"

"It takes money."

I also laughed. "Yeah, well, it does that." While there was still some firelight I got up and carried the plates and pan to the bathtub. I cleaned them in the runoff and laid them against the legs of the tub. I said, "Well, you don't have to go tomorrow, you know. You can work towards it. Develop a plan."

"I hate plans," she said. "I'm too impatient. Making plans means waiting. I hate waiting. Waiting means standing still and standing still means getting hit." She paused. I knew she was thinking about Jeff. "I hate waiting."

I returned to the fire. "Well maybe that's what you're missing. Maybe you need patience. It's not the same thing as waiting, you know. It's really kind of an active thing. It's giving yourself time to figure out what's happened. You know what I mean? It's really not just waiting. It's giving the food time to cook. It's all how you look at things."

"That's easier said than done too," she laughed, leaning back. "I guess I'm just being negative. Life is really just waiting. I'm just waiting to die. If something else comes along in the meantime, then I'll go with it. One thing I know, though, is that I'll never be happy. No matter what. Not now. I don't believe in happiness. People who are happy are just faking it."

She paused. For a minute or two there was silence everywhere. Like a spell. The fire crackled and spit, but in another world. I heard my own breathing. I heard her breathing. She was wrapped in the blanket, propping herself on her side with her arm, her eyes blazing, reflecting firelight. I realized that I myself was actually happy right then, or at very least giddy, surprised and excited that I wasn't drowning.

"Listen," she said, "do you believe in love?"

"I guess so. Why do you ask?"

"Well, because I don't," she said. "I used to believe in it. Prince Charming and the whole bit. Not anymore. Love is just a big lie. I don't believe in happiness and I don't believe in love. They're all just lies."

I thought that she probably believed in both of them a whole lot more than I did. I said, "Well, I guess I think love at first sight is a lie. Or at least a fake. I mean, it wears off and people don't even know who they're with."

"Amen to that."

"Still, I think maybe it's real. Or it could be real. Why not? Or maybe you can grow to love someone. Not that I'm one to talk, but I think bonds can keep getting stronger and stronger and maybe, years and years later, it can become love, or at least something like that."

"I don't know," she said, ready with her answer, "My parents never loved each other. My mother just rules over my father. He says he loves her, but I know different. I think he's just afraid to leave her."

"You're still young. You'll see. You'll get another shot."

"I'm never getting old."

"Oh yeah. I forgot. But I still think you might. You never know. And if you do you'll have to find your patience. You'll have to be happy where you are. You can't worry about where you've been or where you're going. Where you are, even if it's remembering your past or planning your future, that's what really matters."

"Nothing really matters."

“Oh stop it. Look at the stars. Look at the fire. This is a nice place. This is a nice night. It may be a small thing but no matter where you’ve been or where you’re going, no one can take this away.”

She looked up at the stars. Even with the glow from the fire, they were spectacular. Too many too count. Clusters of stars. The conversation died and I loaded the rest of the wood onto the fire. The blaze grew large and began to die out. After a while she said she was going to sleep. She stood up and handed me the blanket and tiptoed her way to the sleeping bag. She was not very steady on the uneven ground, but she seemed more at ease in general. I wrapped the blanket around me and laid down next to the fire.

When my eyes were closed and I started to drift, I heard her voice, softly, from across the oasis, above the dying fire, “You know, she said, I always believed that when I was dying, bleeding out onto the ground somewhere, my last thought on earth would not be about the big things in life, but the little things, like the stars tonight. Isn’t that weird?”

“No, not really.”

“Do you think that’s what Jeff was thinking?”

“I don’t know, Toni. I was hoping you could tell me.”