MISSING AND OTHER STORIES

Trina Louise Drotar
B.A., California State University, Sacramento, 2008

PROJECT

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

ENGLISH
(Creative Writing)

at

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO

SPRING
2011
MISSING AND OTHER STORIES

A Project

by

Trina Louise Drotar

Approved by:

____________________________, Committee Chair
Doug Rice, Ph.D.

____________________________, Second Reader
Joshua McKinney, Ph.D.

____________________________
Date
Student: Trina Louise Drotar

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__________________________, Graduate Coordinator                  ________________
Nancy Sweet, Ph.D.                 Date

Department of English
Abstract

of

MISSING AND OTHER STORIES

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Trina Louise Drotar

As the title implies, these stories explore what is absent in the lives of each character and in the world we live in today. The Lamonts, in the title story, may or may not exist. Only Johnson begins to realize what is missing, both from the town and from his own life. Although Weldon in the second story has experienced the loss of a child, it is not until he encounters a little girl and her father that he remembers and attempts to reach out. Suzie, in the final story, simply leaves Oblong on a quest for something she cannot articulate. None of these characters know what is missing, and they may not even be aware of what is lacking, yet they are moved to seek something outside of themselves and their worlds. The stories in this collection do not offer answers; rather, they ask the reader to question his or her own motivations.

____________________, Committee Chair
Doug Rice, Ph.D.

____________________
Date

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PREFACE

This collection is the culmination of several years of writing, yet it remains unfinished. Of the stories included, only “Missing” and “Morning Reserved” are complete. “Oblong Promises” is the beginning of what will become a novella. Each of these pieces deals with identity. “Missing” seems appropriate in a time when people so often do not really see or hear what others are doing or saying. A lack of presence, of being in the moment, resonates through each of these stories. Today’s society often finds friends via the Internet, and many people seem to be more comfortable on social networking sites than in being with other flesh and bone humans. As such, we are in a sense trapping ourselves inside a created world. This is not unlike the main characters in the included stories. In “Missing,” there may or may not be anyone actually missing. The townspeople rarely venture beyond the town limits. In “Morning Reserved,” Weldon created his own protected world that is broken by his encounter with a little girl. In “Oblong Promises,” Suzie chooses to leave her safe world, the town of Oblong, and head for the big city, but she finds that other towns are not so different from Oblong. Each of these characters breaks from their boundaries in different ways, they encounter new people who challenge what they know about the world and how they view the world and the people around them.
DEDICATION

In memory of
Sylvia M. Reynolds and Pauline H. Frerichs

For
S
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are, as always, too many people to acknowledge and too little space. First, I wish to thank Dr. Rice for his support, his guidance, and his passion for language. He is my thesis advisor, and he always pushes me to find the story, encourages me to keep writing, and reminds me to look for the small details. Dr. McKinney shared his love of poetry with me and supported my interest in poetry writing, and he is my second reader for this project. Although no longer at CSUS, Peter Grandbois provided me with new ways of approaching my writing, with the opportunity to write book reviews, and he introduced me to literature, writers, and styles of writing previously unknown to me. He and Dr. Rice supported my efforts with Calaveras Station and allowed me the freedom to simply write. I thank both of them for their honesty. Lance Olsen told me that one of my stories was likely a turning point. While that story is not included in this collection, it was indeed a turning point. Dr. Lee-Keller has supported me since we met in her West in American literature class where I was introduced to exciting texts and theory. She set the bar high, and I strove to reach it. She has guided me, rallied for me, and written countless letters for me. Appreciation also goes out to each of my professors at CSUS who allowed me the freedom to write creatively in nutrition, Shakespeare, history, and American musical theatre.

I cannot forget to thank my friends in the Sacramento poetry community. There are far too many to mention, but Martha Ann Blackman, Katy Brown, Kathy Kieth, Ann Menebroker, Joyce Odam, Allegra Silberstein, and Sandy Thomas are a few who inspire
me each and every day. Special thanks go to Sandy Thomas who helped me read and 
pore over story after story, prose piece after prose piece, and poem after poem and who 
always asked the questions that I needed and who saw what I could not. She encouraged 
me, and she believed in my stories. I also must thank Bill Drotar for his support, Bob 
Stanley for entrusting poetry to me, my mother Sylvia Reynolds and my grandmother 
Pauline Frerichs for introducing me to reading and my love of books in houses that were 
always filled with books of all types, and to my father for allowing me to explore new 
places. To those not listed, please know that you are acknowledged in my heart.
“Nothing at all could betray him unless he removed his clothes, and over the years his instincts had grown keener and he could detect the precise moment at which innocent conversations verged on violence, when a demure innuendo could leap out of hand, when boundaries were crossed, and at that point he knew to remove himself as neatly as possible from the situation.”

-Patricia Powell, The Pagoda

“In truth, they were peacock feathers, but Usnavy had never seen or dreamt of peacocks, so he imagined them as lions or, at least, cats.”

-Achy Obejas, Ruins
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MISSING

Every April, the community of Wood Trees (an unusual name since there were never any trees, wood or otherwise) comes together to celebrate with a parade of green- and red-dyed dogs of all sizes and breeds (last year, there was a Saint Bernard, poodles in four sizes, and ten mixed breeds, two jeeps as old as the men driving them, and the three clowns Mrs. Schmill recommended that ended up frightening Leah and Billy Moots), cars decorated like trees, a marching band consisting of elementary and high school children, and a variety of others who’d rather participate than view. Beginning at dawn, children and adults line the street leading in and out of town. The parade begins when all participants are ready. Three years ago, the parade didn’t begin until a few minutes before midnight, and twelve years ago, well, it was dawn the next day before the parade began. Mostly, though, it begins before noon. This year, however, no one was sure. You see, Clyde and Connie Lamont were in charge, and one of them was missing. Trouble was, no one knew for sure which Lamont was gone.

How is it possible, you might ask. In your town, signs would be hung on signposts, tacked to wooden telephone poles, and taped to the side of community mailboxes, each rectangular unit barely large enough for the monthly bills. But Wood Trees is not your town. Each house, most two bedroom and some three or four (Mr. and Mrs. Thire live in the only five bedroom), has its own mailbox. Only the Mackelaney’s mailbox has ever been knocked over. Freak windstorm that people still insist was a tornado. Residents don’t have enough funds to make copies for each of the five hundred mailboxes, and no one wants to clean signposts or telephone poles, although Mayor Baker once had to
remove a lost dog sign from the pole at the corner of Maplegrove and Branch. Seems like a stranger passed through town on his way to Lockbridge, must have been about twenty-three years ago, and his purebred Dachshund disappeared. The man, whose name was Harvey or Harris or something beginning with an H, posted the sign and offered a ten-dollar reward for the return of Millie. If you’re wondering whether Millie and her owner were reunited, look at the photographs from the parade ten years ago.

Mrs. Gital (most people agree she lacks a first name) announced the missing Lamont by calling the town’s business leaders together for a meeting at Rhonda’s Place. Over a breakfast of eggs, coffee, and red cinnamon-apple-spice pancakes topped with apple and nutmeg syrup, the group devised a plan. They’d collect data on Lamont sightings. They reasoned that other people collected data (marital status, number of children over the age of ten, whether a person had been examined by aliens, and how much money one earned) and figured they could do the same. Mrs. Gital reminded Jim Deger and Phil Tion that no photos existed of either Lamont. Rob Cone, manager of the three-story building on Elmwood Way that serves as the town’s business park, reported that one of the Lamonts had been spotted picking up broccoli, or perhaps it was an orange, at the Sage Supermarket over on Willow Way just last Wednesday. Mrs. Gital noted the sighting on a palm-sized lined pad. Sally and her sister Susan had spotted Clyde, or maybe it was Connie, rounding the corner of Miller Street Thursday afternoon. Could have been evening they agreed. Sighting noted. Al reported speaking with a Lamont by telephone Friday morning. Their rent was paid in full for six more months.
Mrs. Gital collected sightings from as far away as Evergreen Road and Eucalyptus Avenue that backed up against Sign Hill where the town’s children often climbed in order to slide down the upright portion of the letter D (it had a bump reportedly caused by an earthquake in 1933). No reports from Birch Lane. A core group of investigators set out each morning asking shopowners, housewives, maintenance men, and children. They asked clowns, butchers, ballerinas, dry cleaners, window washers, dog-walkers, nurses, telephone repair people, dispatchers, retired generals, and that old man over on Maplenut Road who many believed killed his six wives. He had not seen Clyde or Connie and said not to come back. Johnson Netip offered to compile the information in his computer, so he and Mrs. Gital met, and she read from the list while he typed. He told her that a spreadsheet, or perhaps a graph or even a database, would help locate the missing Lamont. He entered March 5 as the date that Clyde or Connie went missing. Favorite food unknown. No pets that anyone knew about. Johnson entered both sightings and people contacted for the next several days before asking if anyone had gone to the Lamont house.

Mrs. Gital had been too busy with parade matters. Jim and Phil had been looking through boxes of photos, and Rob had been busy managing his office building. Sally and Susan claimed they didn’t know the way. And Al refused to leave the town limits. Johnson reminded Mrs. Gital and the others that there could be no parade if the missing Lamont was not found. They nodded in agreement. He further reminded them that this would be the first time in the town’s history that the parade would not occur. They nodded again. Based on the information received, he explained to the group, he believed
that Connie was missing. He asked if anyone could provide additional information about her.

“She always wears pink shirts.”

“No, Sally, they are blue and green,” said Susan.

“You are both wrong. She wears blouses,” said Mrs. Gital.

“I’ve only seen her wear dresses.”

“Not dresses, Al. She usually wears trousers and a jacket. Black or brown. Never tan.” Jim glanced up.

Sally peeled polish from her nails.

Johnson told everyone to quiet down and asked if anyone had ever actually talked to Connie. Wasn’t it possible, he wanted to know, for her to wear more than one color and more than one style of clothing? They agreed that it might be possible, but each was certain the information they’d provided was correct. Johnson asked Sally if she wore the same Hawaiian shirt every day and if Mrs. Gital wore that same twenty-year-old jacket every day or whether Susan ever changed her shoes. Each agreed that they changed their clothing. Connie, however, always wore either this or that. Johnson moved on to Connie’s physical description, which was as broadly defined. She might be five-four or eight, possibly taller than Clyde. Her hair was either blonde, not too light, or brown, and Sally thought it might have been black once. They agreed that it was not red. Johnson noted that Connie did not have red hair. Hand size ranged from small to large. Someone suggested that she was missing two fingers, the result of a kitchen accident some years
earlier. She walked with a limp. Her hip had been broken. Or her back. She used a cane. She had one leg that was shorter than the other.

Johnson ended the meeting and went home that evening. He would venture out to the Lamont property in the morning. He spent the time with Anvil, a dog he’d acquired several years earlier from a man passing through town who’d been unable to care for the then sick dog. Turned out that the dog was not sick, just pregnant. Johnson had found homes for the three puppies. Mrs. Greene took one of them, and Mr. and Mrs. Tary took the others. Johnson often wondered if the puppies had grown into beautiful dogs. Anvil was not what most would call beautiful, but she was Johnson’s constant companion. She had tiny eyes set deep into a too-large head, perky ears, and a tongue that always flopped out the left side of her mouth and dribbled spittle on everything. He brushed her coat daily and bathed her weekly.

* * *

Johnson left around nine the next morning for the hour long drive to the Lamont property perched atop a steep ravine overlooking the remaining trickle of a once powerful river. He drove alone. The others feigned illness, business, or family, but he was certain that they could have spared a couple of hours. He tried to listen to the radio, but there was only static. He sang while he drove. He began with his childhood standard about the beer bottles, giving up before reaching ninety-five. Next, he tried the boat rowing song, then the bus song, then others that he could only recall a few words here or there to. Only five miles outside of town and already out of songs, Johnson talked to Anvil who
sniffed out the half-open window, head twisted sideways, tongue flopping against the window.

About midway between Wood Trees and the Lamont property, right before the road began inclining, Johnson spotted a woman with auburn-colored, close-cropped hair. She wore a long skirt and carried a straw hat. A bicycle lay on the ground. Johnson pulled over. Anvil barked. Johnson asked if the woman needed some help. Her bicycle had broken, she explained, perhaps he could give her a ride. She lived in a small house ten miles down the road on the edge of the meadow. Johnson said he hadn’t recalled seeing a house there before, but he’d be glad to drive her. She thanked him, and he placed her bicycle in the trunk.

“This is Anvil, and you are?”

“Cerise,” she said.

“A lovely name. You should sit up front or Anvil’ll drool on you.”

Johnson glanced at Cerise while he drove. Her hair was the color of the sun setting on a fall evening and seemed to pull in and hold all of the sun’s light. Her eyes were almost turquoise, almost jade, more green than blue. When she smiled, they didn’t crinkle to a half-closed position like so many eyes. Hers opened wide almost as though she were surprised at her own joy. Johnson spoke about Anvil, and Cerise nodded, never saying much, never offering any information. He told her how he’d acquired the dog, the few places they’d travelled outside of Wood Trees, and how Anvil was Johnson’s best friend. Cerise nodded and smiled. Johnson’s eyes moved between the road, the rearview mirror, and Cerise. He no longer tried to sing childhood songs, and he no longer paid
attention to Anvil. He stroked the steering wheel with a light touch as though he feared injuring it. Cerise’s legs disappeared under her skirt after she pulled them up onto the seat, all but one big toe, which was painted in the shade of pink the night sky turns by the lake in mountains above Wood Trees where Johnson had spent many weekends with Desiree before her death twelve years ago.

Johnson swerved the car just missing five burros. He’d forgotten about the wild burros in this part of the country. The car sputtered, then stalled. He turned the key, but the car would not start. He apologized to Cerise, who was reaching for the door handle. She uncurled her legs and stretched them before opening the door. Johnson urged her to remain in the car. She smiled over her shoulder and pushed the door open. Anvil barked and tried to climb over the seat. Johnson was grateful that he’d installed a kid and dog barrier between the front and back seats. Johnson reached out for Cerise’s hand, but her arm slipped out of his grasp, and she exited the car, leaned against the right front fender, and cooed at the burros.

Johnson stared through the windshield as Cerise reached her hands out toward the burros. They seemed to turn their attention to the barefoot woman in white with one pink toenail. She rested her body against the car, hands outreached, and cooed. The largest burro, probably one hundred feet away, stepped toward Cerise. Johnson’s hand was on the horn in ready position. He wished he had a gun or a club in the car. Perhaps Anvil could frighten the beasts. The burro strolled toward Cerise, who held her position, kept her hands outstretched. A second burro stepped away from the group, headed toward the car. When the first burro had spanned half the distance, Johnson pressed the horn. The
burro stopped, turned its head toward Johnson, who gripped the steering wheel with one
hand and turned the key with the other. The car sputtered but wouldn’t start. Cerise’s
gaze never faltered.

Anvil barked and jumped against the wire barrier. Johnson told the dog to keep
quiet and sit. The large burro was within a few feet of Cerise’s outstretched hands.
Johnson’s ears were ringing, and he felt lightheaded much like the only time he flew in
an airplane. He’d been twelve, thirty-four years ago. His family had flown to San Diego
to visit the wild animal park. There’d been the rhinoceros that had used the rental car’s
hood as a scratching post. Johnson had felt the warm liquid darken his pants then, too.
He wanted to call to Cerise, but he’d heard about the wild burros. They travelled in
packs throughout the countryside and ventured into some cities where they followed
tourists and snatched food and packages from their hands. They could not be tamed.

The largest burro stood inches from the tips of Cerise’s long, slender fingers. She
remained still and cooed. A breeze lifted her top, revealing a small tattoo just above her
left hipbone. Johnson squinted but could not see the image through the dusty windshield.
He tried the key once again, but the car didn’t even sputter. The large burro turned its
head toward the others, as though telling them that there was nothing to fear. They began
to move, first just stepping their feet out, then turning toward the car. Johnson’s chest
felt heavy when the burros began moving forward as a group. The large burro called to
still-unseen others. The smell of urine-soaked denim filled the car and mixed with
Anvil’s unwashed body and dog breath. Although cool outside, the sun warmed the car’s
interior, and Johnson’s armpits trapped and collected large drops of sweat, staining his light blue shirt to a shade closer to dry denim.

He picked up a towel that was on the floor and swiped it at his pants and shirt. He rolled the window down an inch and stuck his stubby nose out. Cerise was surrounded by three large burros and two smaller ones. Although he couldn’t see her face, he knew she smiled, that her eyes were wide and clear and somehow communicating with the burros. Her body was relaxed, even her arms and fingers which had not moved. It seemed to him that she belonged in the road with the burros just as Desiree had belonged with the red-tailed hawks. He removed the key from the ignition and grasped the door handle, which first felt cold, then hot. He grabbed his jacket from under his seat, then turned the door’s handle. The door opened and cool air passed over his face, his arms, his chest. His flesh bubbled up as it did each winter when there never seemed to be enough blankets or firewood.

He inched his body out of the car, wrapped his jacket around his waist, and left the door ajar, hoping Anvil’s barks would be contained within the car. Cerise never took her eyes off the burros, yet he knew she acknowledged his presence and invited him to join her. He remained next to the door where he could watch the interaction between the young woman and the feral creatures.

He checked his left wrist for the time. They’d been there only thirty minutes, so he thought it unlikely that anyone from town would come searching for him. He had never purchased one of those portable phones and now wished he had, but he remembered last year when the acrobat group came up from some town in Arizona. The group’s manager
refused to let them participate in the parade because he couldn’t keep in contact. He blamed the trees and mountains and told the mayor that he should insist they be cut down and leveled for progress. Although the town was sorry to see the troupe leave, the mayor paid for the manager’s ticket. Johnson had hosted the first meeting after the parade, and all present agreed never to ask outsiders to participate again.

Cerise petted the smallest of the burros. She stroked its head and ears while the larger burros remained close, and she never removed her right hand from the animal. She held her left hand out, palm up. Johnson didn’t need to sniff her hand to know her scent to be a faint musk overlaid with essence of strawberry and just a touch of jasmine. She bore the scents of the earth. And those of the sun and moon.

Johnson moved to the front of the car, placing one foot directly in front of the other like the officer had directed him to do many years ago. Of course, he’d also had to hold his arms out at his sides. Not this time. He kept his arms close to his body as he moved and kept his eyes on the burros, prepared. Prepared to do what exactly, someone might ask. To run? To punch the animal in the nose? To save a damsel in distress? To faint like he did when confronted by a vicious dog? To his credit, he’d been only eight at the time. Still, he’d never lived that down. So many years later, and the story is still passed from one generation to the next. Fathers seem particularly interested in sharing with their sons. “Son,” they might say. “Watch out for vicious dogs. Remember what happened to poor little Johnson when he encountered that vicious Pekingese all those years ago.” No one’s quite sure, even today, whether Johnson wet himself before or after he hit the ground. Turns out that the vicious dog was a licker, not a biter.
Johnson reached the car’s front. Anvil no longer barked. Cerise continued petting the burro. The original five burros formed a semicircle around her, and Johnson counted eight on the perimeter. Others waited further back, perhaps members of a different herd.

“Cerise,” he said. “I need to leave.”

The young woman shrugged her shoulders once, but Johnson wasn’t sure whether it was some sort of reflex or an acknowledgement.

“I am late already, and I am looking for someone. You should come with me. In fact, you could return to Wood Trees for our parade.”

Cerise shrugged.

Johnson scooted back to the car door, opened it, and helped Anvil out. Once the leash had been attached, they began walking. Johnson glanced back from time to time to see the young woman still leaning against the car, still petting the burro, and still holding her hand out. He considered going forward to the Lamont place as he had originally planned, but the thought of walking up the hill did not settle well. He figured that it’d be easier to head back to Wood Trees, call Cole at the wrecking yard and get him to come out and fix up the car, so he tugged on Anvil’s leash, and they turned toward home.

***

Back in Wood Trees, Johnson told Cole about Cerise and her way with the burros and how she reminded him of Desiree. Cole said that he thought he’d heard about a woman like her once. He told Johnson that he’d take him back to his car and see if he could fix it.

“But Cole, have you ever seen the burros?”
“Don’t think so, but I’m not usually looking for them.”

“Yes, but wouldn’t you notice them? I mean, they’re burros.”

“I suppose I would. Signs might help.”

“Signs, yes. Someone should post them.”

The men talked another twenty minutes, each leaning across the roof of a black GTO, an older model with a square body. Mrs. Gital happened by Cole’s shop, which was on the outskirts of town and quite a distance from her home, and asked if Johnson had found the missing Lamont. He said he had not, and asked her about the burros and Cerise. Mrs. Gital said she was interested in both and called Sally and Susan, who strutted into the shop ten minutes later. They agreed with Cole about the woman, but they couldn’t be certain when they’d heard about her, so Sally called Jim and Phil, who couldn’t say with any certainty whether they’d heard of such a girl or not. Soon, Rob and Al and the rest of the town’s business people were considering the question in the middle of Cole’s wrecking yard office. They asked her name, where she came from, where she lived, and they considered asking her to join the parade. Rob suggested that she could lead the parade if the missing Lamont was not found.

“I don’t believe you,” said Al. “You say you found this girl alongside the road with a broken bicycle, but how’d she get there? She claims that she lives on the edge of a meadow ten miles down the road. Well, I’ve lived here all my life and haven’t seen any meadow.” Al turned. Sally and Mrs. Gital whispered. Jim and Phil turned away. Rob smiled.
Johnson looked at the elderly man. His right hand was larger than the left, he favored his right leg, and his ears were far too small for his head. Johnson looked at the others. Sally and Susan were not identical twins, and he decided that they might not even be related. Mrs. Gital looked like a pear that had been left on the counter for too many days.

Rob was the only resident who’d moved to Wood Trees. Johnson asked if he’d ever seen the meadow.

“Well, Johnson, I don’t believe so. I might have, but I don’t recall.”

Johnson shook his head and looked around at the people filling the small office. Jim and Phil wore the same pants, different shirts in the same shade of pale blue, and Jim’s shoes were newer than Phil’s. Jim’s shoes had recently been polished. Phil’s had never been. Sally had a broken fingernail, and Susan had peeling polish on most nails. Neither woman wore jewelry. Only Mrs. Gital wore a wedding band.

“Mrs. Gital? Sally? Susan? Any of you ever seen the meadow?” Johnson asked each resident, calling on one after the other, around the circle as though they were in school. “How about you Jim? Phil? You ever get out of your office?” One by one, Johnson asked each.

The people mumbled and filled the room like the sound unseen insects make when you pass by certain trees or certain clumps of grass. A sound that rises and falls as though it were a living, breathing creature. Johnson covered his ears with his hands, and Anvil interjected a series of barks as though arguing against the insect sound, which continued to rise in pitch and which had yet to fall.
Jim’s index fingers were the longest on both hands. Mrs. Gital chewed her lip.

“How can you disregard a meadow that you’ve never seen but not Connie and Clyde, who, best as I can tell, not a single one of you have actually ever seen. Sure, some of you have spoken with someone claiming to be one or the other, and someone pays the rent. Who’s ever seen the place? Is it nice? Dingy? Is there a piano like at Rhonda’s? A sterling tea set that no one uses like at Mrs. Gital’s? Weeds in the front yard like . . . How many rooms does it have? Is it next to a river?”

The faces stared at Johnson, and the mumbling had all but ceased. Anvil sat at Johnson’s feet.

“Well?” Johnson glanced at Anvil.

“I propose we all drive out to see this woman, find the Lamont place, and see the meadow,” Johnson said. “What harm could it do? We either find that these things exist or that they don’t. Mrs. Gital, have you ever set foot outside of Wood Trees? How about you Sally? The rest of you?”

The hum, lower than before, rose and fell and then rose again, muffled by coats and shoes, yet amplified by the dirty tile floor, the cement walls that retained heat during summer and cold during winter, the metal chairs situated against the far wall, and the counter that once had mosaic patterns but that now bore a few still-glued, broken tiles. No wood. No cloth covering windows. No shades. Peeled paint exposed a rotting windowsill in which glass trembled when the occasional small plane flew a bit too low or when the daily freight train crossed town on its way to deliver or pick up cargo and from which Johnson once waved. He had hopped on as the train slowed to a near stop behind
the fruit stand out on the west edge of Wood Trees and jumped off as the train reached
the point of exit. He’d lost a canvas sneaker that day and walked home in his socks. His
leg still caused pain when he ran or jumped or sat or even stood too long. He prodded the
group again.

“Cole, didn’t you hop the train once?”

Cole nodded and offered to lead the group.

* * *

The small caravan was led by Cole’s green tow truck. Johnson arranged rides for
the others. Mrs. Gital and Al agreed to ride with Sally and Susan. Mrs. Gital insisted she
sit in front, even though Sally usually did. Johnson told the women to quit bickering. Al
scowled. Following them was Rhonda’s bright orange truck, then Mr. Landis and his
black and white cow car, Rob in his top-down sports car, Jim in one car, and Phil in
another like the caboose. Once assembled, Johnson and Anvil joined Cole, and they
pulled out of the wrecking yard. Johnson and Cole spoke about Cerise, the meadow.
Neither had seen the meadow, yet they agreed that they were the only ones who might
have driven that far from town. Downtown seemed almost vacant, even though it was
midday Wednesday. The bank building, once a source of artistic pride for the town,
seemed worn, faded. Broken. Chips appeared as gouges, and one of the sculptures was
missing, taken during the night five or six years ago and never replaced. The shiny,
mirror-like exterior of the four-story building where Pete’s Coffee and Donuts used to be
was too new, too sparkly. Too too. Cole drove slowly past Rhonda’s Place, Liberty’s
Books, the Wash-O-Matic laundry on Fourth, Fred’s Ice Cream Sundays on Old Mission,
which was no longer open even on Sundays, and the tow truck wended its way up and down various streets and passed each of the twelve churches, the converted movie theater which now housed shops selling trinkets to tourists who never visited, and old Molly’s Fruit Stand.

Outside of Wood Trees, grasses grew taller, and Johnson noted several shades of green from a dark, almost black to a light, nearly yellow. Flowers in shades of red, pink, orange, yellow, and violet dotted the sides of the road, which grew steeper as they wound their way down. Trees, some scraggly and others shapely, grew and sheltered the truck. A large bird bent a small tree’s branch nearly to the ground.

Cole stopped next to Johnson’s car. The others pulled up and stopped behind.

“They were right here,” Johnson said. “She leaned against my car this way.” He reached out his hands. His arms too heavy. “She stood for some thirty minutes. Burros came from over there,” he said and pointed toward a small clump of bushes too small to cover even a newborn burro. “And from over there.” He walked toward a path that had been worn into the dirt leading down from what residents considered a hilltop.

Johnson turned back. Cole had the hood raised on Johnson’s car. Only his brown work boots were visible. Sally stroked her hair while Susan and Mrs. Gital argued about something. Susan seemed to be winning. Rob remained in his car; Johnson was sure he fiddled with his radio. Jim and Phil leaned against Jim’s car. Rhonda and Mr. Landis were absent, and Johnson figured they’d probably turned back before leaving town. Al stood at the spot where Johnson had first encountered Cerise. Johnson was certain that it was the very place where her bike had stopped, where he’d picked her up. He called, but
Al didn’t respond. Johnson continued to search for the burros, to find where they’d come from, some evidence that they’d been there. A hair, some fur, excrement. Anything. Nothing. He recalled the scene earlier, visualized Cerise, the burros, their song, their dance. Their communion. Johnson returned to his car.

“Bicycle’s still here. See.” Johnson held the trunk lid and pointed. The others milled about. The buzz rose. No one came to see the bike. They didn’t notice the shade of periwinkle it was painted or the little chink on the front fender. They didn’t notice the white pinstriping on front and rear fenders or the battery-operated headlight or the seat that appeared custom-made. They didn’t notice that the tires were new, that they were whitewalls, that the bike was a three-speed woman’s, which Johnson imagined she often rode wearing skirts. And they didn’t notice that the bicycle had a name. Blue Mare was painted in cursive along the center upright bar. Small periwinkles in the same shade of pearlized white flanked the bicycle’s name. Johnson traced each letter, trying to imagine the person who’d taken the time and the care.

“Car needs a few tweaks,” Cole’s voice came from inside the engine compartment.

Johnson glanced again at the bike before joining the group. He asked about Al, but no one knew where he’d gone. Johnson mentioned that he’d seen him a ways back on the road where he’d encountered Cerise. The buzz rose another octave. He asked if they wanted to come with him. Cole declined. He was, after all, working on Johnson’s car. Mrs. Gital said that it was too dirty, but Sally and Susan should go. They disagreed. Rob turned up his radio. Jim and Phil rubbed their bellies and said they didn’t feel well. Johnson shook his head and told them that he’d go alone.
The sun hadn’t yet begun to set, but it would in about an hour. The air would cool, and he couldn’t recall if the old man was wearing a jacket. He most likely was not since the weather was warm when they left town. Wood Trees was at that elevation where the temperature dropped quickly after sunset, quicker than near the ocean on a January day, quicker even than in the mountains where the sun shone bright while the temperature never rose much above sunrise. In a couple of hours, the air would be nearly as cold as it would be in the morning just before the sun stirred the molecules and warmed the air. Johnson walked back toward Wood Trees to where he’d first encountered Cerise and where he believed Al might be. His imagination brought forth images of Al and Cerise dancing in the road, of Al having been attacked by burros, of Al having had a heart attack, or of Al having suffered a stroke and that he’d be laying still like some sort of road kill, flattened to the blacktop. Johnson tried to sing.

Johnson was relieved when he didn’t see Al, then quickly wondered where the old man had wandered off to. Although Al kept himself trim and rumors indicated that he did one hundred push-ups each morning and ran a few miles each afternoon, he was still old. Johnson called his name and was rewarded only with the sound of what he believed to be a lizard scurrying down the embankment. The bushes moved briefly, the foot-tall grass briefer. No visible prints. The dirt was beginning to lighten as the moisture evaporated as it did each summer. Now a light chocolate color, the hue of a cup of cocoa, heavy on the milk and light on the cocoa powder, not the type made with a bar of Ghirardelli or Godiva, and not the type from a vending machine where a cup with playing cards drops and the machine churns and spews out watered-down warm chocolate,
spraying the cup and the containment area, and everything else within spraying distance with chocolate and a person was fortunate if the cup filled halfway. The ground would move toward that color, remain a few weeks before darkening once again until the rains saturated the ground and turned the mineral-rich soil nearly black. Johnson called Al’s name a few more times before Al appeared.

“Where were you?”

“Up there, just looking around. You know people used to dig for, well, they just dug.”

“Dig? Why?”

“Well, Johnson, I don’t really know. Why’d you come after me?”

“Well,”

“And why’d you drag us all out? You should’ve known she wouldn’t be here. Sure, the bike’s still in your trunk. But her, no way she’s gonna,”

“She might have,” Johnson said. Al’s hair was longer than Johnson had thought, still more brown than gray, almost more so than his own hair, which had been graying for about ten years.

“Might have, might have not. You sound like one of those school gals with their daisy chain wishes for love. Maybe he will, maybe he won’t.”

Johnson was easily a few inches taller than Al, yet he felt like a child whose nose only just touched the top of the candy counter at Anchor Drugs and only if standing on tiptoes. It seemed as though his bones were shrinking as he stood near a clump of grass, that he was in fact getting shorter, becoming smaller, not like in a horror film or science
fiction story way, and not because he suffered from osteoporosis. And not like Alice. He felt the connective tissues contract and pull the bones closer. First his legs became narrower, then shorter. Johnson touched the right thigh, then the left, pressed his fingers into the flesh covering his skeleton. His torso contracted and expanded and contracted again before his arms joined the dance. He’d once danced with a too-tall girl in elementary school during some class where the boys lined up on one side of the auditorium and the girls on the other. The teacher made pairs of each boy and girl. Johnson had been last. One girl had been absent that day. His nose didn’t reach the teacher’s shoulder even when he stood on the very tips of his toes, which he only maintained for a split second. He’d willed his body to grow that day, to elongate immediately.

“Johnson, did you hear me?”

“Sure. No. Sorry, Al. What did you say?

“I said it’s getting cold, I’m hungry, and I think we ought to get back to the others before dark. It’s not a long walk, Johnson. Come on.”

* * *

Cole had closed the hood and was sitting in his tow truck, the only vehicle left. He told Johnson and Al that Mrs. Gital said she needed to return home since there didn’t seem to be any girl and after all, the car had been repaired. Susan and Sally drove off with Mrs. Gital in the back seat. Rob sped off right behind. Jim and Phil bickered before leaving. Cole explained that he’d waited in order to tell Johnson that his car was fixed,
that he’d need to take it to a shop for an inspection, and that he would help Johnson locate Clyde and Connie.

“That is,” Cole said, “if Al doesn’t mind waiting.”

Al shrugged. Johnson suggested they travel with both vehicles. Just in case. Al shrugged again, said he’d ride with Cole.

Johnson put Anvil in the back seat, then pulled out behind Cole. He scanned the road for signs of the burros. Of Cerise. He drove past the turnoff to the Lamont place, figured Cole would turn there on the way back. A sapling, not more than six inches out of the ground, grew between two trees that were well over ten feet. Their branches filled with leaves in varying stages, and reached up, not extending outward as so many of the other trees did. Leaves shimmied from the slender branches that would soon offer shelter to birds no larger than an infant’s fist. Long shadows reached over the road like fingers outstretched. The road curved ahead, and Johnson turned the steering wheel to accommodate the figure. Cole’s vehicle had driven straight through. The rearview mirror was empty.

As the car rounded the next curve, Johnson saw the edges of a meadow not yet fully bloomed. Dots of orange, purple, pink, red shown through the many shades of green. Johnson stopped the car. The grasses were long enough to move, short enough to walk through. Yellow-greens changed to green-yellow and spring green, a color he’d only before associated with crayons seemed abundant. A dark green, almost the color of last year’s Christmas tree that had been trucked in to sit in front of the Post Office, rimmed the far edge. Every shade of green became visible as Johnson looked into the meadow.
These weren’t just the few greens from a box of crayons or a set of marking pens. They weren’t even the greens from a range of quilting fabrics or sewing thread, and they certainly weren’t the range of greens that had been in fashion a few years ago. He searched the meadow, noted small patches of brown. He’d never recalled having passed this meadow or even having travelled in this direction before. He looked for the house, scanned the edges of the meadow larger than the lake on the west end of town. True, it wasn’t really a lake, but the townspeople always referred to it as such. It was really more like a hole that had been carved into the ground by some miners or developers so long ago that Al probably couldn’t remember. The hole had never been filled, so it collected rainwater and runoff. No one ever swam in the lake. No boats ever floated there. It just existed.

Cole’s truck was not there. Johnson thought perhaps the men had driven past the meadow, hadn’t actually seen it. It was, after all, a small meadow, but a meadow all the same. He looked in one direction, then the other, for the truck. Anvil barked, the sound muffled by the closed windows. Johnson let Anvil out of the car, put her on the leash as he always did. It was a long leash that Johnson believed allowed Anvil some freedom. The dog ran into the meadow, sniffing and barking and running as dogs so often do. The air was still, yet filled with early spring scents. Earthy. Sweet. Spicy. Johnson thought he sniffed periwinkle, maybe some of the wild mustard he’d heard people gathered. He longed for the scent of carnation, of rose.

About a quarter of the way across, Anvil barked and jumped. Johnson felt the leash slip from his grasp. Anvil ran through the grasses and the just-blooming wildflowers.
Johnson looked down the road for Cole’s truck, listened for the clanking of the tow chain that, although secured, whipped about when Cole drove, especially around the curves. He heard something, but he couldn’t be certain. Anvil’s barks distorted other sounds. The sun was beginning to set, and Johnson knew that it’d get cold very quickly. He called for Anvil, but the dog didn’t return, responding only with additional barking. His car was parked not far from where he stood, the bike secured in the trunk.

Johnson stepped into the grass. It rose to crew sock length, tickled his shins, and its coolness could be felt through Johnson’s slacks and dress socks. He did not wear the type of shoes appropriate for traipsing through a meadow. They weren’t expensive shoes. There were no fancy shops in Wood Trees, although a couple had stopped there once and opened a boutique, tried to sell the townspeople expensive clothes in trendy styles and colors. They closed the shop without making a single sale. Story was that they packed up their stock and moved to another town. No, Johnson shopped where the others did, at the F and D department store down on Decid Street. Those passing through have often mistaken the sign to be Decide Street, and they’d ask the clerks what they needed to decide. Only the outsiders thought that was funny. Actually, the street’s proper name was Deciduous Street, but like the type of trees it was named after, it lost some of its leaves. No one recalls when that occurred. Like the trees, shops were also empty. All but the F and D. Although a department store, it sold a limited number of items. Two or three types of men’s shoes. Johnson owned one pair of each type. None were for meadow-traipsing. He stepped again. The earth felt springy, not quite spongy, and he thought perhaps it was the grass. As he crossed the meadow, he noted the
different types of grasses. Wide blade and narrow, thick and thin, tall and short, soft and rough mixed in the meadow. The flowers that had only appeared as dots became evident, although he didn’t know their names. He made a note to learn them. The only flower he recognized looked exactly like it appeared on the bike. The only difference was the color. In the meadow, the flower was not a pearlized white; rather, it was a shade of blue Johnson could not recall having seen before. Not quite the shade of the evening sky before sunset or after sunrise. Not the shade on a stormy day. Or a sunny day. Not even the shade of water, certainly not the water in the lake.

Once he’d made his way through the meadow, Johnson grabbed Anvil’s leash and told the dog they were leaving. He pulled the leash, but the dog seemed to be rooted in the ground. The more that Johnson pulled, the more the dog seemed to refuse to move. Johnson wound the leash around his palms and tugged. The dog sat. They were still some distance apart. Johnson shouted. Anvil didn’t move. Johnson came closer. The dog stayed, did not bark. Johnson heard what he thought was the large burro braying, the sound coming from some point beyond the meadow, behind the large boulders and the red canyon walls that held histories and stories. A hawk soared overhead. Johnson closed his eyes. The last rays of sun shone red behind his lids. White spots flickered. He sniffed, smelled grass, a nondescript odor that was neither foreboding nor welcoming. It was simply grass. He listened for the chain, a single bray, laughter, cooing, even Al’s voice. The air carried no sound.
Weldon had hiked for what seemed like hours before finding the spot where the otters always left their marks. Further down the path he knew that beavers would have felled yet another tiny willow, just like he knew that the fog would lift as the sun warmed the air. It had been two years, four months, and thirteen days since Weldon had last come to the Cosumnes River Preserve. He used to come every Sunday morning, arriving promptly at seven because that was the time when the air was most still and the sounds of the smallest creatures echoed through the protected area. Weldon checked his watch. Six forty-eight.

He looked up as the sun’s rays filtered through the canopy that had grown to well over sixty feet tall. He shivered. The oak branches spread, never touching, a millimeter separating each one, reminding him of the double crested cormorant he once saw sitting high in a tree at the river’s edge drying. Its wings spread to their full width of four or five feet. He didn’t know then that both father and mother incubate the eggs. Weldon pulled his jacket collar up so that the fur brushed against his neck. Unlike the cormorant, the fur was waterproof.

Weldon heard otters splashing in the water, imagined them diving for food and playing. Probably four, he thought, and wondered if one was a juvenile. He walked toward the protected river area across from the cattails where he believed the otters were. Where he’d seen them before. His right foot slipped, but his hands landed on the muddy path, preventing him from making full contact. He wiped his muddy hands on the jacket.
To his right, a fallen tree, arms broken, decomposing and feeding the earth, unable to house or feed the many birds who once relied on its strength. No longer standing proud, tallest tree in the grove. Weldon had spent many mornings studying that particular tree, and he knew the lines of its bark as if it were his own skin. Drawings filled his sketchbooks. Patterns, swirls, leaves unfurling in spring and dropping in fall. He had drawn each limb, and he could match each offshoot to its mother branch. He bent down, unable to touch the once smooth covering, and watched as ants scurried back and forth carrying bits and pieces in their strong jaws. The splashing stopped.

The caw of the raven and the squeal of the scrub jay fused into a single tune both familiar and strange. Weldon looked up, but the birds were not visible, only their song vibrated the air. He considered it strange that scientists categorized these large, often aggressive birds in the same category with canaries, nightingales, and warblers. He could not recall any odes to ravens or scrub jays.

Spiders had abandoned their webs of spun silk, leaving only drops of dew shimmering like diamonds. If the thinnest thread of light reached. He lingered.
Listening. Looking. One web stretched across the path of brown and gray leaves, flattened and caked with mud. He imagined that the leaves were once green, offering shelter to the preserve’s many creatures. Now, he could not identify them as willow, oak, or maple. They weren’t sequoia. In webs, flying insects still trapped, wrapped by the hungry spiders, had long ago given up trying to free themselves. He didn’t know if the spiders would return, although he had. Trees wept, shedding the morning mist. Weldon listened to the drops splash through the dense canopy, thinking that only one in a billion
or so actually reached the ground. The sound reminded him of the summer rainstorms back in Texas, when the clear skies turned dark, when the rain poured down for a few minutes before moving on. No thunder or lightning here. One drop landed on the web. He waited, but no spider came to explore. Every web, he had read in a book, was unique, and each type of spider created a different web style. She had feared the spiders and their webs, which Weldon considered as beautiful as the delicate bobbin laces his grandmother used to make, and she would have insisted that he knock down the web.

Weldon shuffled so as not to slip as he moved around the barrier. A few paces further, he stopped. The fog hung low over the open water where the otters splashed. They dove, floated on their backs, and dove again. A single bird floated on the water, occasionally dipping its head in search of nourishment. No longer as dense as an hour earlier, the fog resembled a single sheer curtain. Neither gray nor silver. Nor white. Weldon turned his head up, opened his mouth wide, and waited. The familiar splashing pulled his attention back to the water where the largest otter flipped water on himself and on the smallest of his companions. A father, a mother, one boy, and one young girl. The family splashed and dove while Weldon stood at the river’s edge, watching. Thinking. Remembering Chloe’s first visit.

* * *

He and Mary had brought Jason and Chloe there on a cool morning in late February. It had been early, the fog unusually thick and late to rise that day. Rain had soaked the land for thirty-seven days. Chloe held her daddy’s hand while Jason dragged his feet along the muddy path, covering ant holes, and pulling along the already mud
covered and soggy leaves. Weldon and Chloe teased Jason about making otter tracks down the path, but Jason turned away, his thirteen-year-old mind involved in music that Weldon neither understood nor liked. Music that blared from his headphones and from his bedroom in their nine room ranch house, just a short bus trip from downtown where Weldon worked as an administrative agent for a legal services firm. He never understood what the title meant, but he’d been with the firm for fifteen years, and they gave him two weeks paid vacation each year. Chloe’s favorite songs usually involved busses or dinosaurs. Those he understood.

“Weldon, I don’t know what you see out here. It’s cold and wet and dreary. I’m going back to the car,” Mary said.

Weldon nodded. He knew she’d only come that day because of Chloe who wanted to follow her daddy and draw and use the big glasses. She’d never been able to say binoculars; it always sounded like bonculars. Weldon and Chloe would laugh; Mary would frown. He showed Chloe the pictures every Sunday, even when she was too young to appreciate them. She asked about the different trees, plants, and creatures. She was fascinated by the webs, and Weldon used to show her his grandmother’s bobbin laces. They were packed away for Chloe.

“I understand. Jason might want to go with you, too.” Weldon waved and picked up Chloe’s pink fleece mitten hand. She was dressed head to toe in pink fleece. Weldon thought she looked like a human cotton candy. Not the bagged kind. Chloe had gone through green and blue and red and yellow phases. Now it was pink. Her room, clothes, toys, even her food.
Chloe wanted to see everything. The tree that Weldon drew sketches of, the otters he told her about, the ants, the beavers, the willows, the oaks, and the hawks. They moved along the slippery path, stopping at one spot to admire the lichen, which hung from branches like an old man’s beard. It was more airy than a beard, as though it were a pale green-gray spilling of molasses, the kind used to make lace roll-up cookies. The sticky kind of molasses that spread slow and uneven. Lichen so thin and delicate, yet able to survive in the heavy downpours that came each January, often flooding the paths. Chloe reached up to touch. Weldon scolded her, “Honey,” he said, “lichen is alive just like you and me, so we can’t grab or pull or tug because the lichen will be hurt.” She asked if it would cry. “Yes,” he said, “it will cry. These are its tears. Right here. Do you see?” He pointed to drops of dew which clung to the foot long creation.

* * *

Weldon checked his watch. Ten past nine. He wiped his eyes with the back side of his hand. He glanced to his right and saw lichen tumbling from branches like a lace shawl covering a woman’s arms on a warm summer evening. The type of lichen he and Chloe had seen. A man’s deep laugh, a young girl’s giggle. A raven’s caw. Splashing. The sounds comforted Weldon as no others could. The man and girl were close, probably where the beaver felled trees and the red-tailed hawks performed their air ballet. Weldon gazed at the water, watching.

* * *

“Daddy, can we see the hawks? I want to look with the bonculars and see the tails.” Chloe had tugged at Weldon’s jacket sleeve, so they followed the path to where the
hawks usually danced over a field that in late April reminded Weldon of a Monet or Seurat with splashes of color dotting the landscape. Since it was February, there was little color in the field, other than the greens of the foliage growing, providing shelter to small field creatures, and feeding the deer that came from the outskirts of the preserve. More greens than in a giant box of crayons or in the entire range of DMC embroidery floss. Hawks fed on those who sought shelter in the grasses, and bees pollinated the still invisible flowers. Weldon helped Chloe with the field glasses because they were too large for her hands that were barely a quarter the size of his. He held his hands over hers while she scanned the sky, disappointed that there were no hawks. He told her that the otters would probably be out since the fog was beginning to thin.

* * *

Weldon heard the man and girl coming closer, their voices louder. His laugh seemed to come from deep within his belly, and hers was more like a giggle. Weldon imagined the man to be about six foot three, some two hundred forty three pounds, and about thirty five. He wondered if the wife was in the car. The girl sounded like she was seven, about Chloe’s age. The otters continued to splash and play. Ducks had joined the otters on the river, and they floated on top, occasionally dipping their heads to scoop some insects or other type of nourishment. Weldon waved his arms at the gnats that flew around his face.

The man held the young girl’s left hand in his right. “My girl here wanted to come out today and see this place.”

“Morning,” said Weldon. “Otters are playful today.”
The man was about five-foot-six, weighed probably all of one hundred forty pounds, and the child looked about seven, maybe eight. Her dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail with a long pink ribbon, and she wore lavender and pink fleece mittens. Her hat and jacket matched. She pointed at the otters, “Oh, Daddy, they’re so cute. More than Andy and Buffy.” The man agreed and reminded her that their dogs were too large to be cute. “Can we play with them?” He explained that they were not toys or pets. She frowned. Weldon held out the field glasses and asked if she’d like to try them. Her hands were about a third the size of his own. She grabbed the glasses from Weldon’s hands and held them to her eyes.

* * *

Weldon had let Chloe hold the binoculars when they reached the spot where the otters usually played. One otter was barely visible, but Chloe could see it with the glasses. Weldon squatted beside her, not an easy task for a man of six foot two and carrying three hundred nine pounds, but it was important for him to come to her level from time to time. To see the world through her eyes. They waited for other otters and were rewarded about thirty minutes later when two others joined the first one. Chloe remained silent and still because Weldon had told her that loud sounds or sudden movements would startle the water creatures. They stood by the river for nearly an hour before Mary’s voice broke the stillness.

“Weldon. Chloe. Where are you? Jason and I have waited long enough. It’s time to leave.” Weldon heard her voice grow louder as she approached. It was the voice she used when demanding that the gardener use his hands to pick up the leftover bits of
grass that the mower’s bag didn’t catch. Her voice varied little, shifting between demanding and ordering. She seemed to prefer the ordering over the demanding, but not by much. Weldon calculated her distance and placed her where Chloe had touched the lichen, thankful she wasn’t near the spider webs.

“We’re down by the water, Mary. Just follow the path. Chloe’s watching the otters.”

“Mommy, come and look,” Chloe said, turning her head toward the voice.

“Chloe. Chloe.” Weldon watched his daughter slip down the bank. Her tiny cotton candy body bobbed in the water. She cried out, but Weldon froze. “No.” Chloe floated from the shore. The otters drifted, bellies toward the sky, paws raised above the water. A twig with a single leaf swirled three or four times before a rush of water pushed it past where Weldon stood. Water bugs skimmed across the water. A duck dove below.

“Weldon, where the hell are you and Chloe? This place is such a mess. Webs and creatures and mud.” Mary turned the corner. Mud had splotched her shoes probably when she couldn’t avoid the small puddles that likely housed microscopic living organisms that were neither animal nor plant. Weldon had landed squarely in one of the puddles as he and Chloe made their way down the path, and Chloe had laughed at her daddy playing in the mud, stomping about like the kids at the playground. The more she laughed, the more Weldon had stomped and slopped about in the mudhole. He promised to make mudpies with her later.

“Chloe,” Weldon said, pointing to the river.
“What are you talking about?”

Weldon only pointed. The pink had been swallowed by the blue-green of the river. The otters had floated out of sight. Only the duck remained, diving and returning to the surface.

“Chloe’s out there?” Mary stared at the river. “Go. Get her.” Mary pushed Weldon, but he only crumpled to the ground. Mary ran to the river’s edge. She called her daughter’s name maybe ten or twenty times before she collapsed onto the mud-covered foliage that grew dense along the river.

* * *

“Mister, these are really cool.” The girl held the glasses to her eyes with some effort. The heavier pair had been caked with mud. Little bits of grass still clung to the cracked lenses. The newer binoculars came in a box, not in a velvet-lined, leather case shaped to fit the heavier, much older pair that had belonged to Weldon’s father and that he had hoped would one day belong to his son. The sporting goods store that morning had been crowded with dads and sons, with individuals, and with couples. He purchased an inexpensive pair.

Weldon glanced at the little girl, then turned back toward the water. Reeds grew where he knew cattails would wave as summer approached. A few geese sounded their way across the sky as they returned from wintering in a warmer climate. A family of otters splashed near the far shore. Willows, some scarred, others felled by beaver, remained leafless. A familiar sweet and pungent odor drifted. Skunk, though a year-round resident, was rarely seen, and Weldon’s notes referred only to scenting. He
breathed the odor in through his nostrils and opened his mouth as though to taste. Close, 
but not close enough to sting or burn the eyes. Weldon couldn’t yet smell the tang of 
dandelion or mustard or those tiny lavender flowers on the tall stems whose name he 
could never recall. Too soon. Too early for the bees, and the ants were still 
underground, and most of the migratory birds would not return for another couple of 
months.

“Hey mister, I can see across the water. Look.” The girl thrust the glasses toward 
Weldon. He stepped back. A stick scratched his ankle just above his socks which barely 
covered the knotted bone that still protruded from the flesh. Weldon bent down and 
moved the stick aside. It was small, almost delicate, but not fragile. It was dry, yet not 
brITTLE.

The girl tugged on Weldon’s jacket. He turned. She grinned. One open space. 
Chloe had never received any coins in her tooth pillow.

“Mister, you wanna look?”

Weldon stared at the little girl offering his field glasses. He stammered and took the glasses. She pointed across the water. He pointed the glasses in the direction.

“Do you see it?”

Weldon peered through the glasses, rotated the knob, but the cheap glasses would not focus clearly. It was as though a layer of tulle hung between him and the intended viewing object. He squinted, shifted the glasses. He looked at the little girl who was pointing across the water. He expected to see one of the otters sunning or a duck diving or some plants, but none appeared.
“I’m not sure what you want me to see,” Weldon said, looking down at the little
girl.

“Everything, Mister, just everything. I saw . . .,” she said.

Weldon no longer heard the girl’s voice. He handed her the binoculars and
stepped aside. A slight breeze rustled his hair, not too long or unkempt. He’d forgotten
his hat in the car. And his gloves. He considered going after the hat then changed his
mind. The sun was slowly warming the air, and he hated when his head became sweaty.

The girl’s father stood under a tree looking at the device in his hand and tapping
keys every few seconds. A lizard rustled the leaves and twigs nearby. The man remained
focused. The girl stood in a clearing where grass was just beginning to peek through the
cold wet ground. She called out about birds and ducks and flowers, although they were
simply stems, and she said, “Daddy, look at the peaches.”

“Not now. Daddy’s busy.” The man never looked up.

“Those aren’t peaches,” Weldon said.

“Sure they are. Look here,” the girl handed Weldon the glasses again.

“Peaches don’t grow here.” Weldon looked at the little girl. She was about the
same height as Chloe with hair more the color of copper than brown. “Peaches grow in
this area, but they don’t grow in the preserve. What you see are . . .”

“Don’t tell her they don’t grow here. If she wants to think they do, let her just
think that,” the man said without looking up from his hand.

Weldon watched the man and the girl standing apart twenty, maybe thirty, feet.

“Mister, these are so cool. It’s my first time.”
“Do you like it here?”

“Yep. I wanna come again. Daddy, can we?”

“Maybe. We’ll see. Daddy’s busy right now.”

“I used to come here a lot, but I haven’t been here in a very long time.”

Weldon glanced at his watch. Eleven twenty one.

“How come?”

“What?” Weldon looked at the young girl, who no longer held the glasses to her eyes.

“How come you don’t come here any more?” She looked up.

Her eyes were hazel with a hint of blue around the edges. He couldn’t recall the exact color of Chloe’s eyes. Maybe blue. Deep blue. This girl’s eyes were speckled. They reminded him of a night sky filled with twinkling stars. Chloe’s eyes had been round and big. Sometimes he had teased her, telling her that they looked like bug eyes.

* * *

The rangers had pulled the bloated pink body from the river several hours later. Weldon and Mary were taken to the hospital. Jason went home. The funeral was held the next week. Hundreds of people came. Weldon liked to believe they came because Chloe had touched the lives of so many in her short stay on earth, not because she had died so young. The casket was embellished with Chloe’s favorite images, but there were no otters or hawks or lichen. Weldon placed his sketches inside. The coffin was closed, so people passed it and stopped in front of a photo taken at Chloe’s birthday party. The people hugged and kissed the photo. Mary arrived after the pastor had spoken about
Chloe and heaven, after Weldon had spoken about Chloe’s interest in nature. She sat at the back of the chapel. Jason was absent. Mary shared the first car with Weldon on the twenty minute trip to the cemetery. They neither spoke nor touched. Their eyes stared ahead, never out the side windows, never toward one another. At the cemetery, Weldon reached for Mary’s hand.

* * *

“My little girl,” Weldon’s voice stopped, “cannot come here any more.” He knew her laugh, high-pitched and lengthy. He often thought that she’d pass out from laughing. It was what some might call an infectious laugh. Mary called it annoying. Chloe laughed with ease.

“Why? Was she bad?” the little girl handed the binoculars to Weldon and squinted her eyes just a bit. She puckered her mouth, forcing her cheeks closer to her eyes.

“Oh no. She was never bad.” Weldon believed that even when Chloe had broken his favorite and prized ceramic vase that he’d been given as a gift many years earlier. She’d been playing in the house with a tennis ball, and Jason had been babysitting. Chloe blamed Sally, their Yorkshire terrier, but Weldon knew better. He told her how he’d broken something of value when he was her age. He thought Perry Mason couldn’t have gotten a better confession from a five-year-old.

“Then why can’t she come here?” the girl’s eyes betrayed her age. They were the eyes of an old soul, of a child who could see more than she was supposed to. She looked up into Weldon’s eyes, which he considered green.
“She just can’t,” Weldon said.

“Don’t bother the man, Raquel,” the man said, glancing up and over.

“But Daddy,”

“Leave him alone, Raquel.”

“It’s okay,” Weldon said, then regretted saying anything. He didn’t really want company, and he thought perhaps the man would take Raquel and leave. He could hope.

“She’s not bothering me.”

“Mister, can I look again?”

“Sure, Raquel. My name is Weldon.” He handed her the binoculars.

“Thanks Mr. Weldon.”

“You’re welcome.”

* * *

After the funeral, Mary quit speaking to Weldon. Jason shoved earbuds in his ears. Weldon nearly lost his job. He went to counseling. Without Mary. Without Jason. The counselor told Weldon that he must return in order to confront his grief and guilt.

* * *

Weldon watched Raquel as she held the binoculars and pointed them across the water, up toward the sky, at her father, at the trees, at the ground, and at anything that was within the radius of where she stood along the bank. The ground sloped toward the river and wasn’t yet covered with grass that slickened from spring rains and river overflow. Green nibs barely showed. A few ground level weeds, sticky and seed-laden on the underside, dotted the mottled brown. Soon, stems would sprout, and a flower
would emerge that would mimic other flowers. Bees and butterflies would begin pollinating flowers and trees, mostly missing the imitators. Waterfowl would return and call for mates, create nests, and incubate eggs of all sizes and colors.

Weldon watched Raquel looking. He didn’t know what she saw or experienced. She smiled. Giggled. Shouted occasionally to her father or called to Weldon about peaches or oranges or plums. She pointed to geese, unaware if they were hawks or sparrows or that soon a cormorant might be spotted in a tree, wings spread, drying itself. He didn’t know if she could swim, if her dad or mom had taken her for swimming lessons, whether she had progressed from sand flea to the next level or whether she still required flotation devices.

“Raquel, time to go. We’ve been here long enough, and you’ve seen everything,” the man shouted from his position under the leafless tree. He pocketed the device, brushed invisible nature from his pants and shirt, ran his fingers through his hair, and dusted his loafers.

“But,”

“No buts, Raquel. I’m tired, and you’re finished looking at whatever.”

“Okay.”

“Give the man back his binoculars, and let’s go. Make it snappy.”

“Mr. Weldon, my daddy says,” Raquel held out the binoculars.

“It’s okay Raquel. There’ll be other times. You’ll be back. And you’ll need those to see the birds and the plants and the otters.”

“Really? For me?” Raquel grinned. “Daddy, look what Mr. Weldon gave me.”
“That’s nice Raquel. Now, it’s time to leave. Thank him and let’s go.”

“You’ve got a great girl there, and she’s very interested in nature. I hope she can continue to explore. My name is Weldon, by the way.”

“We’ll see. Come on Raquel.” Raquel’s father dragged her along the path toward the parking lot.

Weldon waited alone for the otters to return, but the fog no longer veiled the water, and the otters would not return until early the next morning. A lone duck bobbed on top of the water, sending ripples out like some sort of encoded message. A red-tailed hawk soared high above, joined a few minutes later by another. Weldon looked at the sky, watching the ballet. He reached into his left pant pocket and withdrew a small piece of his grandmother’s bobbin lace. He waved it high in a salute to the performers, then walked to the river’s edge and placed the lace on the water.
She stuffed her no-name jeans, her five tee shirts, her favorite, once bright yellow, flannel pajamas with a cocoa stain on the cuff, and all of her cassette tapes into the duffel bag she’d purchased at Rex’s Army/Navy Surplus shop down on Triangle Street a few days earlier. She left a note on the television screen for Richard, her husband, and walked out the front door. The note simply read, “Make sure to pay the bills. I’ll call.”

Suzie had lived in Oblong her entire thirty-seven years. She’d attended Oblong Elementary School, Oblong Junior High, and Oblong High. There was no Oblong College or she’d probably have gone there. Instead, two months after graduating as valedictorian, she’d married Richard. There was no baby. Richard’s job kept him in Oblong. When he was offered an opportunity to go to San Francisco, he said, “Can’t go there. Strange people you know, Suze.” He always called her Suze like he was her dad or something. Never Suzie, Sue, or Suzanne, her birth name. Just Suze. Other opportunities came and went. They could’ve gone to Chicago, Houston, Portland, but it was always, “Too expensive, too strange, too big, or too something,” he said. Their three-bedroom house was a perfect fit, and she had her gardens. Roses bloomed year round, and there were the daffodil, tulip, hyacinth, and gladiola bulbs she planted each season, and the annuals so she’d have cut flowers inside. She tended the backyard daily, spending at least four hours sowing seeds, watering, feeding, and protecting the plants from predators. A full vegetable garden provided them with all they needed. Artichoke plants surrounded by carrots. Snap peas grew up strings attached to the redwood fence.
Garlic, onions, tomatoes, squash. She never bought grocery store vegetables. A couple of fruit trees were beginning to mature, and she expected apricots, apples, and cherries within a year or two. If asked why she left that mid-September morning, she’d have said, “But sometimes, you just have to get away and see what’s beyond the border of your enclosed world.”

Suzie heaved her duffel bag into the trunk of the 1982 yellow Ford Escort. It was her car because she was the only one who could drive a standard shift. Although twenty-three years old, the car started on the first try. No sputtering like Richard’s truck or squirrel sounds like his car. Suzie adjusted the mirrors and seat, shifted into reverse, and popped a Bob Seger cassette tape into the deck. The music drowned the sound of gravel being crushed as she backed the car down the driveway.

She stopped at the Flying Ace gas station on Road A. What used to be a flying horse atop the once-red pole resembled some toy at the bottom of child’s toy box – the doll with a crushed face or broken arm, the stuffed bear missing a nose or an eye or much of its stuffing, or the car missing its wheels and at least one door. The faded sign seemed somehow appropriate. Layers of paint peeled from the wooden building traced the years that Suzie had visited. The red paint the summer when she was eight and snow ice was the newest offering, replaced the next year by some new candy. Blue paint appeared every four or five layers. Yellow only once. White peelings curled back on themselves and brought the layers that rested atop them to attention. Oblong kids usually came out to help paint until they reached the age of twelve or thirteen and figured out that they
could earn a few dollars mowing a lawn or babysitting or delivering some newspapers. They, like their parents, spent their earnings elsewhere.

The familiar bells clanged when Suzie pushed the glass door, which was covered with flyers from events long past – a carnival five years earlier, a pasta fundraiser a few months ago for the Miller boy who’d developed some sort of cancer, a theater production of a play Suzie’d never heard of, several rummage sale advertisements, a church potluck, and other flyers hidden below the outdated top layer. Tom leaned on the sticker-covered glass counter and offered his usual, “Hey,” before saying how long it’d been since Suzie’d been by and asking how she’d gotten there. Suzie reminded Tom that he’d once told her how important it was to drive the old car every now and again. He nodded, but she doubted he remembered. His eyes, once blue or green, were cloudy. Visibly dry. Focused. Suzie wondered what he did all day, whether anyone actually came by either to chat or to purchase some of the candy that was at least two years old, the stale chips, flat soda, or gas. The highway ran around Oblong, missing the Flying Ace by a few miles. There was no exit. Suzie paid for the gas and map, waved, and drove down the road to Myrtle’s Diner.

Myrtle’s was usually crowded on Sunday mornings, but Suzie was surprised how many people were there that Tuesday. She looked for an empty table, finally finding one against the west wall below photos of Myrtle’s luminaries: three mayors, some guy who’d made it to the minor leagues but had never actually played a game, Myrtle senior, Myrtle junior, and Myrtle the fourth. Rumors had circulated for years about the missing photo. The current story was that she was just a bad seed, not that she’d stolen from
Myrtle’s Diner or had harmed anyone, just that she wasn’t worthy of hanging on the wall. “Every family needs one,” some people said. “Every family has one,” others said.

Gloria carried dishes between tables and the kitchen where Al flipped burgers and pancakes every day from six until two. She called out food orders. No mayo for Denise Lind. An extra pickle for Mrs. Bullam. Three large milks for the Carmoll kids. Her voice sounded hoarse. Suzie waved as Gloria passed her table for the fourth time without stopping. The waitress slowed just enough to drop a menu on the table. Although in her mid-twenties, Gloria seemed older. She still moved quickly from one table to another, carrying two or three trays filled with plates of pancakes, burgers, fries, spaghetti, chicken, steak, potatoes, salads, and drinks. She greeted most guests by their first name, including Suzie.

“What’ll it be this morning?”

“My Sunday usual, Gloria.”

“Right.”

“You need to slow down.”

“No time.”

“You already passed my table four times. Anyway, is Emily around?”

“She’s in the kitchen. I’ll tell her you’re here.”

Suzie didn’t have time to respond before Gloria scooped up the menu and headed to the next table, thanked the Donaldsons, then cleared the dishes. Suzie watched the waitress rush, usually carrying platters or trays, and always carrying more than one item. Suzie dropped things. Every dish and glass at home had at least one piece missing, one
crack, and most had been glued. Some had been tossed in the garbage after having been repaired one too many times. Dishes clanked, and the door chimed each time someone entered or left.

Over a plate of blueberry pancakes, scrambled eggs, and a glass of orange juice warmer than the hot foods, Suzie looked at her map of the United States. Although just purchased, the map had tears along the creases, and one corner lay next to the eggs. Being in the middle of the country provided her with the opportunity to go in most directions. Not too much north of Illinois, though, so she figured it was better to head in one of the other three. Suzie studied the map, traced possible routes to New York, Seattle, the Grand Canyon, Boston, Philadelphia, California, Dallas, even Kentucky. She skipped Iowa, Ohio, and Wyoming. Interstates and state highways dissected the map, sometimes intersecting and sometimes running parallel. Railroad tracks ran alongside several highways, followed rivers, and provided a welcome distraction from the blue, red, black, and gray lines that indicated roads of varying sizes. Some roads were straight, others twisted upon themselves. Suzie turned the map, dragging it through syrup and butter, several times. She examined it from each angle and both front and back. Dots in various sizes next to city or town names confused Suzie. Unable to decide, she closed her eyes, turned the map around several more times, and placed her finger on what would be her destination. She opened her eyes, looked under her finger, and shouted, “Houston, here I come.” Her finger had actually landed on the tiny village of Boling in the county of Wharton, but it was barely a speck on the map, so she moved her finger to Houston. She ignored the other diners.
Emily, Myrtle’s owner, scurried to Suzie’s table, balancing three or four dirty platters in one hand and a tray of glasses in the other.

“All right?” Emily squatted next to Suzie’s chair.

The two women could have been sisters and often pretended to be when they were younger. Like Suzie, Emily had spent her life in Oblong, but she’d dropped out of high school during her sophomore year to have the first of five children. Emily’s five divorces had rocked the small village. Only Ronald had been from Oblong. After the divorce, or perhaps as grounds for it, he left Oblong. Emily’s second husband, Paul, had been passing through Oblong on his way to Kentucky and stayed in her house for three years, spending her money before leaving for Ohio. Mario was her third husband, and she called him her Latin lover, even though he was Irish. He left her with two more children, a stack of bills, and the clap before heading to parts unknown. The fourth and fifth husbands were brothers, Martin and Daniel, and they had moved to Oblong, as Emily discovered much later, to avoid prosecution for bigamy in several other states. Emily’s other children were the result of clandestine affairs she’d sought outside of Oblong.

“I’m just fine, Em. Better than you, judging from those,” Suzie said, pointing to the trays.

“Look. Here. I’m going to Houston.” Suzie showed her friend the map.

“Houston?”

“Indeed.”
“Why? Richard get a job there?” Emily stood after leaving the platters and tray of glasses on the floor. She rubbed her arms. Faded bruises dotted her arms between freckle constellations.

“No. Richard’s still working for Better Tire.” Emily stabbed her pancakes with the fork that had one bent tine.

“Why then? This is your home.” Emily shook her head, and a clump of graying hair fell across her left eye. If she’d been fifty pounds lighter, fifteen or twenty years younger, and maybe had paid for some serious plastic surgery, she might have resembled Lana Turner.

“Oh, there’s nothing to understand, Emily. Haven’t you ever thought about leaving? I know you own the diner all, but really, haven’t you wondered?”

“Not really. Well, maybe once or twice.” Emily smiled.

“Well, I’ve thought about it, and now I’m going. Want to come?”

“Thanks for the invite, Suzie, but I’ve got the diner.”

“We’d have a lot of fun. Remember when we . . .”

“Suzie, thanks. That was a long time ago.”

“Yeah, but we had fun, Em. Remember . . .”

“I think I’ve still got scars from the whipping my dad gave me.”

“You ever been to Houston?”

“No, but I met someone who’d been through there once. Said it was really big.”
“That’s what I’m looking for, Em. Something big. Maybe they have big, fancy restaurants there. Big buildings, big houses, big yards, big everything. Nothing against the diner, Emily, but it’s still a diner, and you’re here practically all the time.”

“Who’s going to watch over the staff?” Emily turned her head toward a crash in the kitchen. “See? More broken dishes.”

“Well, there must be someone who can watch the place. Just a few days. We’d – ”

“I know, Suzie, we’d have a great time.”

Emily seemed older, not just her hair, but her manner. Her hands weren’t as steady as Suzie remembered. She noticed a slight tremble in the left hand. Facial lines seemed deeper than just last week. Even the smile seemed almost forced. Six days each week, Emily could be found in the diner. The seventh day, Thursdays, she closed the diner and disappeared. The two women used to talk and laugh over cups of coffee, often meeting for breakfast at Suzie’s and stretching one meal into two, sometimes three. Many times, they’d still be talking in the living room when Richard arrived home.

“How long have you been here? Three years now. No vacation that I’m aware of.”

Suzie noticed Emily’s eye twitches, tics. Her left one seemed to bounce up and down while the right one wandered to the outside corner as though something more interesting lay outside of the immediate viewing area.

“Em, you’re tired. You deserve some time off. Can’t Gloria run the place for a few days? She seems more than competent with the diners, especially how she handled fussy old Florence. Does she still sneak her dog in?”

“You’re a doll to ask, but . . .”
“But what? You think the place’ll burn down or that there’ll be an earthquake or flood. Fat chance of any of those things happening. I just bet that Gloria’d jump at the chance to relieve you for a few days. Just a few, Em, not a month.”

Suzie and Emily had travelled for a month before the diner, before Richard, and they’d talked many times about doing that again. They hadn’t gone far, but outside of Oblong seemed far. They spent most of the time in Chicago, riding the L or walking wherever they needed to go. They visited museums, and Suzie reminded Emily of the fun they’d had, just the two of them. No men. No jobs. No gardens or houses. No children.

“No worries, Em. It was great that no one could reach us. We called each day, checked on family, and did as we pleased the rest of the time. Five minutes each day for them. Twenty-three hours and fifty-five minutes each day for us. That’s what we can do again. Just a few days this time.”

Emily’s smile was barely visible, probably would have been missed by most. The corners of her smallish mouth curved north a fraction of a fraction of an inch, but it was her eyes that Suzie noticed. The green irises swelled and the underlying blue surfaced, deepening the green into a teal that glistened. Emily’s eyes had never sparkled, and there were many who claimed they were eerie because the color could be so rich, so deep, and most people gave up trying to see beyond their first impression. Suzie had always found Emily’s eyes fascinating and understood that they were not the clichéd doorway to Emily’s soul; rather, they communicated in a way that Suzie believed was safe for her friend. Only people who were truly interested would spend the time learning how they
spoke. Suzie looked beyond the round eyes that bulged just a bit too much, that were sheltered by thick lids and eyelashes which required no additives. Emily wore only lipstick.

“You sure?”

Suzie spoke directly to Emily’s eyes.

“Sure.”

“You don’t sound so sure, Em. That’s not the voice of the Emily who told me that she’d buy a diner and run it. It’s not the voice of the Emily who decided to try out for the school play and said she’d take no part except the lead. It’s certainly not the voice of the Emily who went to Chicago. That was, if I recall correctly, your idea.”

“Chicago could never happen again, Suzie.”

“Well, of course it can’t. We’re going to Houston this time.”

Suzie laughed and pointed to the map. She pushed her uneaten breakfast away and suggested that Emily sit down at the table instead of standing like a waiter. She pointed to the empty chair under the empty space on the wall. When Emily wouldn’t sit down, Suzie got up and pulled out the chair and all but pushed her friend into the chair.

“Now we can have a real conversation. Aren’t you allowed a break? I can speak with the owner about giving you a break.”

“The place has pretty well cleared out, so I can spend a few minutes.”

Emily’s face seemed to relax. Her lids dropped and shadowed the teal. Her mouth no longer held the smile Suzie’d noticed earlier, the smile that communicated an
unhappiness with work, the smile that reflected Emily’s attitude toward the diner. It was simply a job, a means by which to earn a living.

“Why do you have the diner? I mean, Em, what’s it do for you? I know what it does for the community, so don’t give me that speech. What I want to know is what do you get out of it?” Suzie leaned forward and rested her chin on her hands. She could hear her grandma reminding her that good manners meant not placing one’s elbows on the table, but she had no time to pay attention to manners.

“It’s been three years, Em, and I don’t even know if you make any money. Only the locals come by. Most of them order water or coffee and just take up space most of the day. The old men no longer sit on the porches; they sit here instead.”

Emily didn’t respond right away. She rocked the chair, which had one leg about half an inch shorter than the other three. She began to speak, then stopped. She tapped on the table as though she thought that it might rise up and provide an answer. She looked at the empty space on the wall, the space where Myrtle the third should be hanging.

“She was probably smart, Em. She didn’t go into the diner business. Where are the Myrtles? Dead, dead, missing, and dead. Maybe the third one ran away, left town, moved to the hills, changed her name, married and had children, or maybe she stayed single and had children. Maybe she chose to have no children. At any rate, she’s not hanging on the wall. Neither are you.”

Suzie leaned back, removed her elbows from the table, and folded her hands in her lap like her grandma had taught her. She watched Emily, searched for any sign that her
friend was coming around, that she followed what Suzie had said. She knew the answer would be in her eyes, whether they twitched or remained still, whether the lids lowered or rose, and whether her right eye centered itself or remained in search of something outside. The eye remained pivoted to the outside, and the lids appeared lighter as they rose and exposed more teal above the pupil’s black. Emily seemed far from the diner, yet Suzie believed she was still with her, still digesting her words, still thinking. Emily’s body shifted forward, then twisted as she looked again at the empty wall space. What she was thinking Suzie could only imagine, but she knew her friend well enough to read what was being communicated through the nuanced eye and body movements.

“Well,” Suzie said.

“Well what, Suzie? You can’t expect me to just up and leave. We’re not . . .”

“No, we’re not. We’re better, wiser, and more prepared to have fun than we were then. Look, Em, your kids are out of the house. You’re single. I’ll call Richard. It’s not like we’re leaving forever.”

“You are impossible, Suzie. Did you see how busy it was earlier?”

“Yep, Gloria was everywhere at once.”

“Exactly.”

“We’re the only ones here now, Em.”

Suzie directed Emily’s attention to the empty diner, to the tables with chrome-plated napkin holders, plastic salt and pepper shakers, and bottles of catsup and mustard, to the chairs pushed in close to each table. Seat cushions in the crayon colors of orange, yellow, red, green, and blue created buffers between human and wood and were tied in
little bows. The order and pick up counter had been scrubbed clean, and Suzie knew that the kitchen was spotless. The only thing left for Emily to do was mop the floor. Even the trays she’d carried to the table had been picked up by Gloria on her last round.

“We certainly are, and I need to get moving.”

“So, you’re coming?”

“I can’t,” Emily said, but the eye said otherwise.

“I’ll see you in a few days, Em. I’ll call. You speak with Gloria. She’d probably love the extra hours.”

“Suzie, I really appreciate the . . .”

“Appreciate nothing, Em. This is a trip made for us.”

Suzie smiled at her friend, that coy smile that her grandmother had taught her in order to get cookies from the baker or a few coins from her grandfather or an extra book from the librarian.

“Be safe.”

“Don’t you worry. I just filled the tank, and I’ve got some good tunes in the cassette player. Oh, don’t say it. The car’s just fine, and I don’t need a compact disc player. My tapes and player work just swell. I’ll see you.” Suzie pecked Emily on the cheek, then darted for the front door. “I’ll call you soon. Pack your bags. You know you want to do this.”

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Bob sang about rock and roll, Main Street, those girls, and that chick who stole his credit cards as Suzie drove past little towns and big cities and some open country where
cows or horses grazed or lazed, a few sheep or goats kept the grasses cut, or where a hawk soared overhead in search of its next meal. Cool air passed through the open window and caressed her face. Her long golden-streaked, auburn hair curled around her neck like a tail wrapped about a cat’s body, and she held the steering wheel as though it were an infant. She’d held a baby only once, the first of Emily’s children. The weight of the boy, the worry about his neck position, the soft spot that Suzie could not bring herself to touch, and the smell remained with her even though the boy was now a man who had fathered at least one child. She’d been grateful that Richard hadn’t really wanted children. He’d mentioned it a few times, of course, but he never pursued the issue.

She’d driven six hours, needed gas, and was thirsty. The Skillet Pan Truck Stop was just ahead. Two miles according to the highway sign. Surely they had a telephone there. Richard should be home from his job at Better Tire, where he’d worked since high school. He started there part-time during his senior year when his dad told him he needed a job after graduation. He’d moved from sweeping floors to stacking tires to selling them, and last year he was promoted to Assistant Store Manager, a title which seemed to please him. Suzie never understood why he stayed for twenty years. Perhaps it was loyalty.

As she pulled into the parking lot, Bob was singing about Nancy for the hundredth time. At least. She’d be sure to put in a different tape for the next leg of her journey. Maybe Jim Morrison. No more about that chick Bob was chasing. How much could she have charged on his credit cards anyhow? Jim would sing about. Well, he’d sing something else. Suzie parked under the only tree in the parking lot, although it really
couldn’t be considered much of a tree, maybe more of a bush. Even her snap peas offered more shade than this little thing that looked as though it hadn’t been watered for several weeks.

The smell nauseated Suzie as she entered the Skillet Pan. Fats and oils seemed to hang in the air, and Suzie thought she felt the particles attach themselves to her forehead, her hands, and weave their way through her long hair. Grease stained the table coverings, the other diners, and formed bubbles that neither floated nor wafted. Rather, the bubbles chugged their way through the already heavy air before dropping on any surface. A woman of about fifty showed Suzie to a table and tossed down a menu so stained with ketchup, grease, and other unidentifiable food products that Suzie couldn’t read the print. She ordered a Mr. Pibb when the waitress returned.

“That all? You could’ve sat at the counter.” The waitress never smiled. “I’ll bring your Pibb. Here’s the check. Cashier’s over there,” she said, pointing at the door, before sauntering to a table with five men. The waitress laughed, leaned toward the table, and touched each man’s shoulder.

Suzie waited for her soft drink and thought about what she’d tell Richard. She missed Emily already. Although the women had been friends since they met in Mrs. Manlowe’s first grade, they were different. Suzie had only dated Richard when she reach high school. People didn’t move into Oblong; they passed through on their way to some other place. Fewer people left, which meant that boys and girls met, dated, and married when they finished high school. Choices were limited for girls like Suzie. Emily had dated Ronnie, Steve, and Mark in high school even though she used to tell Suzie how
dumb she thought they were. Ronnie married Cathy, Steve chose Leslie, and Mark was one of the few who left.

"Your Pibb." The waitress neither placed nor set the drink on the table. Soda splashed over the rim as the glass tried to balance itself. Suzie watched the waitress return to the table of men. Two had left; three arrived. Emily had always been quick with comebacks and probably would’ve told the waitress a thing or two. Suzie had asked a restaurant worker at Cattle Rustlers to replace the butter-drenched potato with a dry potato. Once. She’d ordered the steak lover’s special and a baked potato with no butter, sour cream, chives, or anything else topping it. The meal arrived with a lean cut of medium-rare prime rib, warm, and a baked potato the size of one of those Cornish hens she prepared every Sunday, but the potato didn’t just have butter, sour cream, chives, and who knows what else. A glob of butter stared at her, and the melted butter dripped down the sides of the perfectly browned skin. The liquid oozed onto the plate, moving slowly toward the meat, and Suzie felt helpless as she watched it slide under and around her perfectly cooked piece of prime rib. The butter had taken on a life of its own, and its momentum could not be stopped. Richard had been midway through his meal, asking why Suzie wasn’t eating, when she picked up the plate and walked it to the kitchen.

"I asked for no butter."

"Sorry, lady. Habit. Everyone likes butter."

"There’s not just butter on this plate, though. There’s enough to build a house with. I want another meal. No butter. Not a dollop, not a speck. No butter whatsoever. No
sour cream. No chives. No bacon. Nothing. I want a plain old dry baked potato, and you’ll need to replace the beef as well. It was ruined by the butter.”

“Like I said, Lady. Habit. We’ll get you fixed up.” The water had taken the plate from Suzie.

Pibb moistened the stained tablecloth, so Suzie dabbed at the liquid, dried her glass, and drank. Not enough to bother that waitress with, who was still talking to the men. A family of seven had wandered in and sat in the booth across the room, and a woman about Suzie’s age sat at the counter. The short order cook flipped burgers and eggs in the kitchen and probably loaded everything with butter. Here, though, Suzie thought they probably used plastic butter. Two children across the room screamed, a baby cried, and an adult, perhaps the mother, yelled at the children. A skillet, as large as one of those homebuilt airplanes that Richard admired when they went to air shows, hung from the ceiling. It wasn’t a very good likeness of a skillet, though, more like something that Picasso or Braque would have created than something from the hand of Rembrandt or da Vinci. Perhaps it was old or was supposed to look that way. Well used. Sure, well-used, that explained why a large crack all but separated the handle from the pan. The handle hung on by the thinnest connection much like the rope that pulls a water skier. If the rope should break. The pan, too, was cracked. More than that, though, it was warped.

Suzie sipped Pibb through the too-large straw, thought about calling Richard, and looked at the woman sitting alone at the counter. The woman’s bobbed hair hung in soft folds against her cheeks, which appeared neither too hollow nor too full. Suzie’s own cheeks, Emily always said, were like those of a squirrel whose pouches had been filled
with nuts for winter. They were the cheeks that old people always wanted to pinch, that adults had pinched when she was a girl, that Richard had attempted to pinch only once. They were the type of cheeks that made Suzie seem like she wore a perpetual smile. The woman at the counter turned away, leaving Suzie to admire her profile. Her ears were a bit too large and detached. Her nose was short, stubby, quite opposite from Suzie’s own long, rather pointed one. Suzie’s gaze drifted. The pay phone was to the right of the counter. She checked her purse for change.

“Emily? Great. I’m glad I caught you. You should meet me here.” The woman at the counter turned, exposing a tattoo that began just below her right collarbone and extended out to her shoulder then down.

“The diner. I know, Emily.” Suzie returned the woman’s smile.

“But really, Emily. I know you’d have a great time. Okay, I’d have a better time.”

The tattoo, although still partially covered, seemed to be one of the women from Picasso’s “Les Demoiselle d’Avignon,” Suzie’s favorite painting. She’d only seen photographs of it, but she’d studied every line, every angle. She’d never tried to paint it. She couldn’t be certain which woman resided on the body or whether it was complete, but Suzie guessed it was. She’d never considered a tattoo, but she’d known some men who had big, black, angry tattoos on their arms. One man showed her his panther. It extended from elbow to wrist on the inside of his left arm. He told her that he kept it covered most of the time. She’d never met any women with tattoos, at least not any women that admitted to having them. She wondered whether Emily had any hidden tattoos.
Suzie pushed Emily to join her, reminding her that Gloria and the others could certainly take care of Myrtle’s if she left for a few days.

“When was the last time you took a vacation? You deserve it.”

“Yes? Well, I know I deserve it.”

Emily countered each argument with a reason for not joining Suzie, and Suzie dropped more coins in the pay phone. She wished she had a cell phone but then wondered about service. Suzie visualized Emily on the other end. Her hair was probably damp from having just showered after a long day at the diner, and she was certain the eye was still not centered.

“Houston’s bound to have art museums.” Suzie felt that if the art museum didn’t work, she’d have to resort to a broken car. Museums and galleries had been the highlight of their trip to Chicago. They had talked of museums in other cities and of perhaps seeing the DeYoung or the Met or one of the many Smithsonians. Suzie wished that she’d done more research so that she could tell Emily what type of artwork they might find there.

“I understand. I’ll . . .”

Suzie continued to drop coins in the phone each time that the voice asked. It wasn’t a request or a demand.

“We could always leave my car and take yours. After all, mine does have problems every so often. There was that radiator leak a few years ago and that time it . . .”

While Suzie tried to listen to Emily, she tried even harder to think of problems with her car or any other car. There was the engine, the transmission, tires, brakes, steering,
water pump, oil, and she wished that she hadn’t relied so much on Richard. He always knew what the problems were, could fix a few of them, and could take the car to the repair shop and have the problem fixed at a discount. He always handled those things.

“Really?”


The woman’s mouth curved slightly as she smiled, her mouth opening just enough to show a spark of white. Her peasant-style blouse had dropped off her right shoulder, exposing more of the tattoo.

“Hi,” Suzie said.

“Melanie.”

Melanie’s hand was smooth, her grip more tender than Suzie had expected.

“I’m Suzie, and I’m on my way to Houston. Texas. How about you?”

“California to Florida.”

“How’d you get here?”

“Detour.”

Suzie and Melanie sat at the counter, drinking Pibb and coffee. Suzie asked Melanie about the detour and was rewarded with few words and fewer details. They sat until the waitress told them they had to order food or leave because they were taking up space. Suzie pointed out that she and Melanie were the only customers and that there didn’t appear to be any signs stating that ordering food was a requirement. The waitress
left. Melanie finally opened up about her trip. She was headed to Florida to meet a man. Bruce owned a nice house in Key West. Suzie asked how they met and was surprised when Melanie said that she’d been corresponding with him on the computer, that she’d found him on Craigslist. He’d placed an ad, and she’d responded. California wasn’t her home. Alaska was. Suzie told Melanie about Oblong and how she’d chosen Houston. Several hours later, Suzie asked Melanie if she’d like a ride.

“Excuse me. Is there a motel nearby?” Suzie spoke loud and close to the waitress’s ear. The smell of bourbon on the older woman’s breath was stronger than when Suzie had first arrived.

“Yeah. Two blocks that a way,” the waitress said, pointing at the front door.

* * *

In the yellow car, Jim sang about Gloria, and the two women drove in the direction the waitress had pointed. Suzie pulled into the parking lot. The motel’s sign, Night Rest, hung by one wire, a nightlight shone from behind the bent slats of plastic mini-blinds that Suzie believed were contaminated with lead dust and should probably have been returned in a recall several years earlier, and there were two cars in the parking lot. Both with flat tires and broken windows. The office appeared closed and had bars across the openings. A dog barked. A female cat shrieked. The women looked at each other and nodded. Suzie decided to call Emily at the next stop.

The Night Rest became a distant memory as the yellow car cruised at an even fifty-five miles per hour. Richard often told Suzie that she was cheaper than cruise control. Melanie rolled a joint, reclined the seat, and put her bare feet on the dashboard. Suzie
didn’t like tobacco and had never smoked even though Richard had a couple of cigarettes every evening. He claimed they relaxed him and told her she should be glad he didn’t drink. Most of the kids in high school had smoked cigarettes and a few smoked marijuana, which they secured from people passing through town, although she’d heard rumors that someone in town grew plants. She knew Melanie wasn’t rolling tobacco. Suzie’s grandmother would have reminded her to say nothing if she had nothing positive to say. The smoke wafted through the car, smelling both sweet and tangy. Suzie ignored Melanie’s offering. Melanie shrugged. Suzie drove past small farms, boarded up factories, and motels with signs hanging loose or lights burned out. Easy Sleep Inn. Springfield, Missouri. Room For You. Joplin. Hats Off Motor Inn. Miami, Oklahoma. Suzie drove, yawning now and then, refusing Melanie’s offers. Bartlesville. Exit 582A. The Odd Burger Pit Stop.

Suzie exited the highway and followed the burger-shaped signs to the restaurant. The road serpentined through grassy patches with flowers interspersed. Brambles grew tall and skinny, and birds flitted in between. A jackrabbit skittered across the road. An identified pile of fur lay, long dried, around the next corner. No telephone poles lined the road. A ditch ran parallel. Suzie drove and Melanie chattered about her trip, what she’d seen, what she expected to see, and about Florida. She asked Suzie if she’d ever been to Florida, what it was like there, and kept asking even after Suzie told her that she’d only ever been to Chicago. Melanie cut her off each time she tried to speak about the trip. Melanie’s words floated around and by Suzie like wishes from a dandelion. Suzie saw
the last sign and made a quick right turn into the unpaved parking lot, a gray Ford Pinto the only other car.

The building’s brick and wood exterior wasn’t much to speak of, but the parking lot was clean, and there were no damaged cars or bars on windows or doors. It was larger than Suzie had imagined. She counted eighteen windows, many covered with what appeared to be lace curtains. She reached for Melanie’s hand, and they walked the perimeter of the building. A loading dock backed up to a field in which wildflowers grew. Several detached buildings were scattered around the back and sides, out of view from guests. The front doors looked like something out of an episode of a western, probably something starring Lorne Green or Barbara Stanwyck. Etched windows. Brass, polished to a mirror finish, and what appeared to be hand-carved and hand-polished wooden doors. The women pushed the doors open and stood just inside, Suzie on the left. Suzie held Melanie’s hand like she used to hold the salamanders she caught when she was seven or eight. She never wanted to hurt them; she just didn’t want them to get away until it was time. Salamanders were slippery. Melanie’s hand was limp, but it was warm.

“This sure ain’t the Night Rest or that flying pan joint. You ever seen anything like this?” Melanie’s voice drifted past Suzie’s ears. “I been a lot of places, but I never. . .”

Suzie dropped Melanie’s hand and walked toward the stage at the far end of the room. Just enough light entered through the open door and the long, cobwebbed windows on either side of the room. A deep red, almost maroon curtain in what appeared to be velvet was pulled to the right side of the stage. Gold tiebacks that Suzie believed
were silk were studded with stones that she imagined were garnet and emerald and amber secured the heavy drapery. A fine layer of dust coated the wood paneling that appeared to be mahogany. Suzie swiped a finger across the wood, felt a sliver penetrate. She climbed the three steps then turned to face the audience. No houselights or spotlights. A dusty light shone. Suzie squinted into the audience of one. She bowed and blew kisses to Melanie, who’d taken a front seat at a round table large enough to hold fifteen or sixteen people. Tables and chairs had been placed as though in anticipation. Of what, Suzie didn’t know. She strutted across the stage imagining herself in some grand dress and hat, swinging a feather boa, thrusting first one hip then the other in concert with the music only she heard. Dust blew up after each step. She sneezed. Her throat tickled. She wanted water.

Melanie clapped like a dutiful parent. She tapped her fingers on the table, scraped her feet along the wooden floor, and didn’t smile.

“Come on, Suze, let’s get out of here.” Melanie tipped the chair on its rear legs.

Suzie stopped, right shoulder forward. “Suzie. My name is Suzie. Got it?” Her voice was low as she walked to the front of the stage, then down the steps. She stopped in front of Melanie, bent down, and said, “Suzie. Not Suze. He calls me that.”


“Suzie pointed. “Door’s over there.”

“But, we’re in the middle of . . . I don’t even know where we are.”
“We passed Miami a while back.”

“No kidding? I thought you were headed to Houston. Miami’s close to Key West.”

Suzie shook her head and turned away. She stood at the bar and studied the reflection. Bottles in amber, red, blue, green, and clear glinted in front of and behind her. The bottles were tall, short, squat, thin, etched, carved, hand-blown, and all were more decorative than functional. Dust covered the leather-trimmed wooden bar, the bottles, and the photographs. The mirror was old, the silver faded, and warping distorted Suzie’s face and reminded her of a visit to a fun house at an amusement park several years earlier. Richard had taken her there as a birthday surprise. Clowns cackled and howled, children cried, and Suzie waited until they’d returned home before she told him how much she hated that trip. Richard insisted that the clowns laughed and were cute. Suzie went for a walk that night and tried to clear the images of her as squat and round, as tall and skinny, as grotesque as the dead whatever it had been that she’d found on that walk.

“Miami, Oklahoma, Melanie. We’re in Oklahoma. Help me find a phone.”

Melanie found the telephone out back, behind the kitchen. Suzie deposited a handful of dimes and nickels and dialed.

“Em. Yeah. I know, but did you see that place? I left a note. Oh. Hey, I’m here with Melanie. Oh, I met her at the Flying Pan. That waitress. Right. Anyway, you’ve got to see this place. Stunning. I’ve never seen anything like it, certainly not in Oblong. Have you passed through Joplin yet? Just a second.” Suzie deposited more coins. “I know. Cell phone. Good that you have one, though. Okay, Joplin. Good. As fast as you drive, you should be here in no time. Exit 582A, follow the burger signs. You’ll see
the car. I can’t wait. You’ll see.” Suzie smiled and hung up the phone, many coins lighter.

“Emily should be here tonight or tomorrow morning. Come on.”

Suzie took Melanie’s hand, and they climbed twenty-eight steps to the second floor. They entered and exited each of the six bedrooms, remaining in the last. A window stretched from an inch or two below the ceiling to the marble baseboard. A fire burned in the fireplace that seemed more at home in a medieval castle. Neither woman asked who lit the fire. Suzie caressed a cobalt-blue pitcher on a dresser, enjoying the smooth coolness, tracing the flowers. Adam, Eve, the tree, and the snake were carved into the dresser’s drawer fronts and matching headboard. Suzie sat on the edge of the bed and examined the quilt. The tiny stitches, not more than a sixteenth-inch long, were evenly spaced. Not machine work. Suzie had never learned to keep her own stitches short and even.

“I don’t suppose you quilt.”

“Nope.”

“I do. Well, I used to. Haven’t done it in a very long time.”

“Oh.”

Melanie said that crafting was not of interest to her. She preferred being outside where there was water and trees and grass, that her idea of fun was resting in a field of grass on a blanket and watching the sky. She was not, she emphasized, a hiker or one who liked to get dirty. She was the picnic basket and blanket type. A radio, a blanket, a pad of paper and a pen was all she really needed. She said that she once spent the entire
day laying in the grass and watching the clouds and writing about them. She filled an entire notebook.

“I’ve never written.”

“I write poetry and stories and just what I see sometimes.”

Suzie listened as Melanie told her about some of the fields and forests and waterways she’d visited.

They sat on the bed, at times sinking into the fullness of the quilt and feather bed topper. They laughed and talked and Suzie held Melanie’s hand.

“We need to get some rest before going on. At least I need rest.”

“I can drive,” Melanie said.

“We also need to wait for Emily.”

Suzie lay back and sunk into the feather bed top.

Melanie walked out.

Suzie called out; there was no response. She was too tired to follow.

***

“Where are you? I drove all this way, and for what?”

Suzie woke to Emily’s high-pitched voice that often reminded her of Alvin or one of his chipmunk brothers singing Christmas carols. She rubbed her eyes, sat up, and called out. The fireplace provided the only light. Unsure how long she’d slept, she looked for a clock. Only the pitcher, dresser, bed, and fireplace appeared. One painting on the far wall was too dark for her to make out the scene. One small rippled mirror in
what used to be a gilt-edged frame hung on the wall near the door. Its scrollwork still intact. Suzie stood and stretched.

“Suzie.”

“Upstairs, last room on the left, Em. Isn’t this place fabulous?”

Suzie met her friend at the door. They embraced before sitting on the bed. Emily related how she’d just hung up a sign telling diners that Myrtle’s would be closed for week because the owner had “gone fishin’.” The women laughed. Emily was not the type to go fishing or climb hills or get dirty.

“What about Gloria?”

“Gave her time off to visit her family or take a trip or just relax. Old Pete’s going to keep an eye on the place, make sure nothing happens while I’m gone.”

“I’m so glad you’re here. What do you think?”

“Dusty, Suzie. It’s dusty.”

Suzie said that the cities and towns didn’t look much different from Oblong, except maybe dirtier. Emily said that they didn’t have much of anything else to offer either. They agreed to spend the night before continuing to Houston. They hugged. Emily asked about the fire.

“Not sure. It was already lit. Figured Melanie must have done that while I was on the phone with you. I wonder where she is. I think you’ll like her.”

“Who?”

“I told you about her. Melanie, from the Flying Pan? She was here before I dozed off. She’s headed to Florida. She’s an odd one. I suppose you haven’t seen her.”
“I don’t think so.”

“Strange. Maybe she’s sleeping in one of the other rooms.”

Suzie told Emily about meeting Melanie, and they laughed about the restaurant and the creepy motel. In Chicago, they’d stayed in a nice hotel. Not expensive. Just nice. The rooms were all inside. They agreed to seek out a similar hotel in Houston.

Suzie took Emily’s hand. It wasn’t clammy or cold or even hot. Unlike Melanie, Emily returned the grasp. They often held hands when they were younger. They’d walk and one or the other would naturally reach for the other. People sometimes snickered or stared. Suzie and Richard never held hands. Suzie hadn’t met many people who could shake hands like they meant it, much less be inclined to hold another’s for an extended period of time. Holding Emily’s hand was not like holding the salamanders or a newborn baby. There was no fear that the hand would slip away or that it might be injured.

“Come on, Em.”

Suzie pulled her friend off the bed. The women wandered in and out of rooms. Melanie wasn’t in the room with the sheet-covered furniture. She wasn’t in what used to be the laundry drop room or in the other bedrooms, all with dust and sheets covering furniture. She wasn’t in the bathroom with its rusty sink and ceiling pull-flush. And she wasn’t in the porch room that looked out to the front over what was left of gardens that must have been quite extensive and must have employed several gardeners full-time. She wasn’t in any room on either floor. They looked out the windows and didn’t see her. Suzie told Emily that the other woman would likely show up soon. “Probably when she gets hungry or cold.” They went downstairs and looked behind the bar and around the
theater area and the dining room and the kitchen, but there was no sign of the third woman.

“Have you called Richard?”

“I meant to,” Suzie said.

“You should call him. He’s worried about you. Came by Myrtle’s.”

“I’ll call.”

Suzie said that he probably missed her cleaning the house and cooking and knowing where things were and taking care of the bills and the garden. She thought about the note she left him. Brief. To the point. The way he always communicated with her.

“You hungry? I’ve got a picnic basket in the car. Bottle of wine, too.”

“I’ll set up a table while you get the basket.”

Suzie searched behind the bar for a dusting rag. She pushed aside empty bottles. The liquid evaporated long ago. She looked in drawers and found tarnished silver. Forks in four sizes; knives in at least four shapes; spoons for stirring, for coffee, for tea, for soup, and for uses unknown; and serving utensils she’d never seen. She sniffed the air. Musty, not greasy. Old. Worn. Suzie thought about the Odd Burger Pit Stop and what it must have been like in its early days. She imagined men and women coming together for fine meals, conversation, and live entertainment. There would have been a piano player, maybe a trio of musicians, possibly a singer. The singer would usually be a woman, Suzie guessed, who would sing from her soul about love, about losing at love, about the tragedy of love, about living without love. Yes, the woman would have sung about those things for sure, and she would have had her hair either long and loose or formed into a
bun and pinned close to her head, the type of style that pulled one’s scalp tight. This place hadn’t always been a burger place or a roadhouse. Suzie knew that as she knew that it wasn’t where she could stay.

“Here’s the food.” Emily’s voice shook Suzie from her musing.

“Don’t suppose you found Melanie?”

“Nope. Maybe if we sit and eat, she’ll show up. Anyway, I want to spend time with you. That’s why I drove here. Dusty or not, this place is pretty interesting. Like a museum or something.”

Suzie smiled.

Emily set the basket on the table nearest the stage, and Suzie opened the front doors. She placed rocks so that the doors would remain open. Dusty light filtered to the table. They ate. They talked about the diner, about Suzie’s plans, about the need for Emily to return to the diner. They tried to convince each other that they could make a go of this place and make it a stopping point for visitors with entertainment, overnight accommodations, and more. Perhaps Emily could sell the diner. Suzie had some money squirreled away. They could clean.

“Scrub from floor to ceiling, you mean. It’s filthy, and who knows how long it’s been since anyone’s used it as a restaurant or anything else.”

Suzie joked about Emily giving money to kids to clean for her when she was perfectly capable.

After they finished eating, they walked through other rooms and outside. Suzie pointed out buildings and features. Emily pointed out wood rot and how much it would
cost to make it presentable. They called Melanie’s name several times. Suzie mentioned
the woman’s interest in writing and being in nature.

“She’ll probably come in when it cools off.”

“If it cools,” Emily said.

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Suzie woke the next morning. Emily was gone. The fire had burned out. Suzie
was hungry, and she needed to bathe. She checked the bathroom for running water. Rust
trickled out of the faucet in the sink and the claw-foot tub. Since the women had used the
bottled waters and wet wipes that Suzie always carried the night before to clean up from
dinner, and since they just poured extra water in the toilet in order to flush it, Suzie
hadn’t considered the difficulty in staying her for an extended period. She looked again
in each room upstairs, then climbed down the twenty-eight steps, checked behind the
stage curtain, behind the bar, and in the kitchen. She called for Emily and Melanie, who
hadn’t returned before she and Emily had fallen asleep, both exhausted from driving and
talking. Suzie found no evidence of Melanie’s presence, and she saw only the picnic
basket, its contents still spread about the table, and knew that Emily had indeed been
there. Suzie returned to the stage for what she imagined had been the final performance
so many years earlier. She bowed to the imaginary crowd, blew kisses, then walked to
the front door, leaving the picnic basket.

Outside, the gray Ford Pinto was still in its parking space, her own yellow car
looked secure, and Emily’s red Camaro was parked in the Disabled Parking Only spot.
Suzie breathed in the cool morning air, its freshness cleansing her lungs as she inhaled.
She took long yoga breaths that filled her lower abdomen, stretched her arms overhead, and squinted into the distance. Two figures that minutes before had been dots on the horizon grew larger. Suzie waved. No response. She shouted. Nothing. She took a few steps and stopped. She looked at her hands and reached one for the other. She waved again to the figures, still quite a distance out in the field.

Suzie wrote the letters large on a scrap of paper torn from a journal she never used. She placed the note under the wiper on the driver’s side. The note simply read, “Enjoy. I’ll call.” She hoped that Emily would at least drive Melanie to a place where she could catch another ride. She put on her sunglasses, got in the car, and backed out. She waved.

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Suzie watched the Odd Burger Pit Stop grow smaller in her rearview mirror. Bob and Jim had been replaced by Bruce, who sang about those kids who had to marry. She wondered where that river was. Certainly not in Oklahoma. A stream, home to tiny fish and snails and water skippers, ran behind her home. During the months of July and August, Suzie spent her days sitting in the cool water, shaded by Quaking Aspens, or she napped under the Redbud trees set away from the stream. Or under the magnolias. The yellow car cruised at its usual pace. Broken Arrow. A sign for new housing. Priced to Sell. Calvin. No Services Available. Coalgate. More new construction. Atoka. A closed truck stop. Durant. Save Our Town signs led into and out of the tiny town. Sherman. Denton. More housing construction where fields once thrived. Trees gone. Streams diverted, Dallas just ahead. Seven exits. Multiple freeways. Suzie stayed on Interstate 45. She passed Mesquite, Corsicana, and Streetman. Towns and signs grew
further apart out of Mexia. One hundred miles to Houston. Fifteen hundred to Oblong.

Population 1580 minus one. Leona, next exit, population 181. Suzie maintained the
car’s speed at fifty-five. Madisonville, 4159. Huntsville, twenty-nine miles. No
stopping. Houston, fifty miles. Population two million. She hoped that there’d be trees
and streams and peas and daffodils. And a telephone. Interstate 45, 610 Loop,
Southwest Freeway, Interstate 10. Suzie turned left toward Baton Rouge. 270 miles. No
notes.