
Land Speculation

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Land Speculation

AARON GILBREATH

BY THE TIME THE NURSES LED KARI DOWN the hall, the mushrooms had so scrambled her mind that she didn't realize it wasn't the drug causing her discomfort, it was the bees. Yellow jackets, actually. Forty-nine stings we later counted.

I left my truck running in front of the ER, trying not to arouse Kari's suspicion by slamming to a halt. "I'm going to get your Sprite," I told her. "Just stay lying down and I'll be right back. Promise to keep your head down." Then I raced to the nurse's window and said, "My girlfriend and I just got swarmed by bees and she's allergic."

With the languid calm of a grazing elephant, the nurse said, "What are her symptoms?" I listed them: red eyes, blotchy skin, numb feet, shallow breathing.

Through the glass partition, the nurse studied my eyes and my breathing, making me think she had already diagnosed my condition: early-stage psilocybin toxicity, questionable character.

"And where is the patient?" the nurse said. As I pointed to my truck, Kari sat up, her bulging eyes and gaping mouth visible through the dirty windshield.

I patted the counter. "I'll be right back." Then I rushed outside, swung open the car door and told Kari, "It's OK. Don't worry."

"What are we doing here?" she shrieked.

On the frantic drive down from the Redwoods to Eureka, I'd lied and told her we were going to a convenience store. "Just lay your head on my lap," I said, "stretch out, and I'll get you a Sprite. Does that sound good?"

She lifted her legs onto the passenger seat, lowered her head onto my lap. "It sounds great," she muttered. She liked Sprite. It calmed her stomach. Acting as if I was just massaging what she called

her "itchy feet," I peeled back the cuffs of her jeans to inspect her ankles. They were swollen, growing puffier by the minute, and cloaked entirely in splotches of ghost white and pink. Same with her back. Discoloration spread above and below her waistline, crept all the way to her neck, spilled over her ears and onto her forehead and cheeks. And her eyes: the whites and hazel irises had darkened to a red far more sinister than any Valentine scarlet. This was the mortal stain of spilled pig's blood, diseased liver crimson. Devil red.

My fear was that her throat would shut. That's what I heard happened to victims with bee allergies: their trachea constricts, then they suffocate. But how do you ask someone if they can breathe without implying that they might soon not be able to? While we had only eaten a few small caps, this was one of her first mushroom trips. I didn't want to throw her into a six-plus-hour nightmare of screaming panic by giving her terrifying news to fixate on. She was already a worrier. She worried about homework, worried about calories, worried about whether she would make a better school teacher or counselor, worried if I thought she was a wimp because she preferred to hike on-rather than off-trail, worried if I loved her as much as she said she loved me. On shrooms, she would flip.

"Honey," I said, "do you hear that whistling? Is that you or the car?" As soon as I said it, I knew it made no sense. I laid my palm on her chest, said, "Take a deep breath for me." She took a deep breath. I said, "Everything feel normal in there?" She nodded the exhausted nod of a sleeping baby. Then I drove the forty-five miles to the closest hospital at ninety miles an hour.

Although the mushrooms hadn't hit me yet, this was the summer of '97. I

was twenty-two. Driving on drugs was one of my few skills.

I kept checking Kari's breathing: Does your throat itch? Feel tight? Feel OK? Averting a sense of urgency with my hushed tone, I stroked her straight brown hair, kept calmly saying, "We're getting close to that soda, sweetie. Almost there." She said the mushrooms made her body "feel all buzzy," a thought which I encouraged lest she think, as I did, that she would soon die on Highway 101. When we finally soared into Eureka, I followed the hospital signs through unfamiliar neighborhoods and told her I'd spotted a convenience store.

Now she was sitting up shrieking, "What are we doing here?"

"Just dropping in for a visit," I said while lifting her from the cab. "We're visiting really quickly, get cream for your stings. Don't worry. Everything's fine. You're fine." I carried her in my arms through the parking lot. Her feet hurt too much to walk. They were as puffed as rotting walrus. She stared at me with those pig's blood eyes. Then by the door I stopped, lowered my voice and said, "Just remember, we cannot let them know we're tripping. OK? Don't say anything about drugs or how things look or sound weird or anything. Just keep it between us." She nodded. "Let me do the talking, and we'll get in and out of here and back on the road in a hurry. OK?" She nodded. I kissed her.

The nurses hustled her down the hall, leaving me standing with a short man in a white lab coat and an out-of-date pair of prescription glasses. He introduced himself as the doctor. Doctor Something-Or-Other. He said, "So tell me what happened." I did my best: We were in Redwood National Park. Kari and I had been together less than a year, and after months of gentle

nudging, she finally agreed to try hiking off-trail—bushwhacking, it's called. While traipsing atop an enormous, downed redwood log—the thing must have been thirty-feet around—she stepped on the yellow jackets, and they attacked. I didn't even see the nest; insects must have built it beneath a slab of peeling bark. They got inside her jeans, her shirt, her shoes. They tagged her arms, face, ankles, scalp, chest.

He nodded as I talked, scribbled notes. When he looked up he stared into my eyes in a way I considered suspicious.

I didn't mention how I had sustained an equally aggressive attack—fifty-one stings, we later counted. I didn't say how I'd been hiking, like an idiot, with no shirt or socks on, only black Converse All Stars, shorts and a baseball cap. Didn't—I don't think—offer my hiking pedigree in order to show that, despite the current situation, I was not some brazen, inexperienced John Muir wannabe who lured defenseless females into danger to impress them. On the contrary, I had hiked, camped, and traveled all over western North America, from Baja California to central Alaska, exploring parks and the rugged backcountry, and that in all my years of off-trail hiking—innumerable hours of it in my native Arizona's rattlesnake-rich deserts—I had never once been stung by a bee.

He might have been impressed, too. Lots of people I told the stories to were. In fact, if you thought about it, as unique experiences go, this bee sting thing was pretty damn interesting. It would fit nicely alongside my other weird adventure tales. Like the time I drank a beer with a homeless Navajo man in Flagstaff; the time a snarling Dalmatian cornered me on the grounds of a boarded-up motel I was photographing; and the time a scorpion stung my foot inside a Texas state park shower. Same with the drive down here: ninety miles an hour? After eating mushrooms? Exciting stuff.

To my knowledge I said none of this. I just stood there stiff and sweating, wondering why the pastel hallway seemed to glow brighter and if I was making any sense. The whole place felt so blindingly bright and sterile that my stomach turned. Usually hospitals unnerved me. This one made me feel

like a pollutant. My forearms were dusted with what I thought was fern pollen. Dark forest soil lined my fingernails. Brown bits of twig clung to my shoelaces. I pictured my body as a neon green virus molecule, part cartoon,

Everyone knows . . . When you're messed up, bystanders always seem to recognize it.

part electron microscope image, with all the bumpy, angry surfaces they display at 250,000 magnification. I saw my viral self drifting through the hospital, then into the cartoon mouth of a woman in one of those human body medical cross-section diagrams for asthma inhalers, me binding like a steroid to clean lung tissue. Whoa. Did that mean I was a toxin or medicine? Death or temporary relief for Kari's highly controlled existence? Part of me wished I was a steroid. Then Kari wouldn't be suffocating with strangers in an unfamiliar town.

Either I spoke or Doc read my mind. "She's going to be fine," he said and handed me paperwork. I filled it out, repeatedly wiping my sweaty palms so the pen wouldn't slide out the way peas do from a pod. I tried to be cool, all relaxed and jokey—"Slow day at the office, huh?" Checked my handwriting's legibility: gotta keep it free of weird squiggles and Dali-esque marginalia. All the dates seemed correct. Her name. Insurance. I'd dotted all the eyes, I mean *i*'s. I was proud of my drugged-up composure, then immediately ashamed of my pride. No one should be skilled at feigning sobriety.

I handed him the clipboard and thought, he knows. Everyone knows. They always do. When you're messed up, bystanders always seem to recognize it. You become overly aware of your mannerisms, but can't conceal your condition. You think, if I wasn't high, would I dangle my hands at my side like this? If I wasn't stoned or tripping, would I normally lean against a wall with one hand in my back pants pocket, agreeing this intently, nodding yes this aggressively? Do I always hang my thumbs on my belt like a cowboy?

Pick the skin on the corner of my thumbs? Am I walking weird? I feel like I'm walking weird. I barely feel my feet. They are touching the ground, aren't they? You look down, confirming gravity's hold, then think, well, I definitely seem to be hunching over, and that's a giveaway. Better straighten up. But you overcompensate. Then when people look at you, you think it's because they're privy to all this tortured commentary, as if a transcript were printed on your forehead like a weather report: "Dark skies inside Aaron today. Storm system moving in, perfect conditions for tornados. Chance of disintegration: 100 percent." Yep, you conclude, they know.

Or maybe not.

My performance with that nurse was spectacular: articulated words, concise sentences, no bulging eyes. I hadn't said anything suspicious like, "That coat is friggin' *whi-i-ite*." Or, "Dude, love the retro glasses." I was just cruising through this doctor-patient interaction with the swiftness of whatever popular basketball stars regular people talked about yet whose names I didn't know because sports completely sucked, especially compared to reading John Muir's journals.

Besides, I'd eaten these things tens of times before. Eaten them in the city and desert and forest. Eaten them with my best friends and alone, camping and at peoples' homes. Then I had motored through the sober world relying on the last turning gears of my gummed-up mind. In years past, my friends and I would eat shrooms and somehow manage to order burritos at twenty-four-hour Mexican food joints *while hallucinating*. Or buy sodas at convenience stores—counting out bills, chatting with clerks—when minutes before we'd been laughing uncontrollably at trimmed oleanders. Once I even picked up my paycheck at SUBWAY as the psilocybin giggles started tickling my innards. Having to make sense when nothing made sense—that was my business. I needed that printed on a business card.

I looked through the front window at my truck—parked between the lines, all proper-like. I scanned the ER. An empty rolling bed sat against the wall far down the hall, which seemed to grow longer the longer I stared down

it. A metal rolling table sat nearby too, close enough to see that some implements covered it. Shiny metal things, what I imagined were scissors and stitchers and folders and such, tools you'd use in reconstructive surgery. Or skin origami. And look at those crazy-ass forceps or whatever those are, I thought. Wow. My Mom used to pull her famous fried beef tacos out of a vat of boiling Crisco with a set of tongs like that. These health care providers should go into the taco business; they could pull like ten tacos out of the grease at once.

Ahahahahaha, hahahahaha, hahaha!

Ha.

Kari reappeared. The nurses seemed to eyeball me as they passed. I wondered if Kari had broken our agreement of psychedelic secrecy, blurted something like, "Your faces are melting!" They led her past me and into an adjacent room.

Doc said something like, "You can go in there now."

The nurses helped Kari onto a bed in the tiny room, which sat beside the front door and front desk, and then they left. We were alone. Alone with our thoughts and secrets.

The room fell silent. I stood there by the bed, staring at Kari, wondering if my hands normally hung by my side this way. A single chair sat against the wall. Would it be weird to sit in that chair on the other side of the room? Would that make me seem callous, disinterested? I wasn't disinterested, I just wanted to sit. My feet hurt and whole body itched. Things just looked so lonesome over there.

I slid my hands into my pockets. Would the nurses mind if I dragged the chair closer? What if I lifted and carried it over? I stood by the bed thinking, staring at Kari and the trouble I'd gotten her into. Then I pulled the sheet up over her swollen, shoeless feet, over the weak rise and fall of her cute narrow chest, on up to her neck so just her beautiful face stuck out from the sheet. She looked like a puppet in a Jim Henson bit. She looked *Muppetish*. She smiled.

"Is that comfortable?" I said.

She whispered, "Yes."

Beside the chair ran a short counter lined with jars of bandages, Q-tips,

tongue depressors. Above that hung a pastel cabinet filled, I assumed, with smocks and cotton balls and rubber gloves. "Look," I pictured myself saying to Kari while pulling on a pair. "Cow condoms."

"Why are the walls breathing?" Kari said.

"Ssshhhh," I said, leaning close, my index finger pressed to my lips. "Don't say that too loud, honey. We don't want the doctors to hear." Not that they'd throw us in jail. I just didn't want to be

detained longer than her recovery required. Kari had flown in from Tucson to meet me in Seattle for the last leg of what was a four-week road trip. Nearly a month before, I had driven alone from Tucson up the coast of California, through Oregon and Washington, hiking and camping along the way. I took the BC Ferry from Bellingham to Juneau where my Mom met me and together we explored southeast Alaska. Mom flew home, and back in Bellingham two weeks later,

PATRICIA SMITH

Paradigm Shift

For the boys in my band

You are slave to deep bell, conch shell,
goat nails and the drum's tattooed skin.
Your body was crafted for this. Hips try
on their fluid. Writhe, then break funk
down to its lowest common denominator:
bead, grunt, cymbal, grind.

If you need to give it a name, find a word
the world isn't using, a sound keening
and pulsing beneath bopping dust.

They say black people are linked crazy
to the drum—not the prescribed *rat-a-tat*
that sets time for some poet's rhyme, but
the deep-throated rhetoric of the madman,
that expletive sparked by doubt.

They say colored folks don't know
how *not* to answer when the drum calls,
gotta go, gotta flow, gotta know right now
what that fuel is. Gotta go, gotta flow,
gotta blow chill lines through this,
all our breath gathered for that question,
toot flute and spittle,
Lord could this be the way a woman bends?

She's kickin' it to the womb song,
the very first soundtrack,
birthed by the architects,
the purveyors of root and conjure. Switch hips
to the chaos they make. Crack back. Shake that shit.

I drove my truck to Seattle to meet Kari. Now she and I were driving home to Tucson together. These were the last days of our journey, the ones you wish would last forever, and we'd intended to drive 320 miles to Sacramento that afternoon. We'd only made it seventy.

Kari looked petrified then laughed. "Oh yeah."

We smirked at each other. The silence enclosed us.

The room did seem to be breathing, the walls swelling and contracting, swelling and contracting, a giant lung. Ha, I thought, magic mushrooms, is that all you've got? I stood and considered it. Was the room actually breathing or was it shrinking instead? Squeezing us together or pushing us apart? What if this was new technology: rooms that changed dimensions to adjust to the number of occupants? If there was any town whose hospitals would have spatially adaptive rooms like that, it'd be Eureka. This was a hippie-college-logging town. It had once been a major galaxy in the Dead Head universe. It was still loaded with co-op-shopping tofu eaters driving art cars and VW Things, the kind of longhairs who kept decomposing yellow school buses in overgrown backyards for parts, for guest rooms, or in case Ken Kesey's ghost reunited the Merry Pranksters.

Northern California was also home to an enormous network of backwoods marijuana-growing operations, big-time stuff. Millions of dollars worth of potent herb sprouted under the protection of the tall redwood forest canopy.

Dinosaur forests, straight out of the Carboniferous. That's why I wanted Kari to hike off-trail here in the first place. "To truly experience the Redwoods," I kept saying, "you have to bushwhack in an old-growth forest. Tromp through the undergrowth, bushes up to your armpits, sword ferns over your head. Then walk along the mossy top of a downed tree, staring into the dark woods."

The idea unnerved her. "Aren't there bears and snakes out there?" she'd say. "What if we get lost?" It had become the running theme of our relationship: playing it safe versus playing it fun; the novel versus the familiar; how worn paths separate you from what's interesting. Maybe that's why she had always

liked cats more than dogs: cats are content at home; dogs have to leave the house to run.

I might have pushed too far. "In the Redwoods," I'd said, "you expect a brontosaurus to peer out from behind

She looked like a puppet in a Jim Henson bit. She looked *Muppetish*. She smiled.

a tree. It's that surreal." Mushrooms would "enhance" this quality.

"I don't know," she said. "I mean, what's going to happen?"

"You're going to go nuts for a few hours, and it's going to be fun," I said. "That's all." She nodded. Hallucinogens require you to relinquish control, which, I explained, is half their appeal. "Just completely losing your mind, because the thing is, you'll always get it back. It's temporary insanity, the only good kind."

Temporary insanity. It all sounded like self-serving BS in the ER. Thinking you could eat mushrooms and a few hours later drive the chilling hairpin turns of the rugged Northern Coast Range? *That* was insanity. That and dating me.

If we made it back to Tucson, I thought, she would never hike again. Another part of me thought how tragic that would be. It was just a few welts. Stings seemed a fair price for a memorable experience, and the point of taking road trips is having memorable experiences. This was college. I firmly believed that experience was the net sum of your youth, one of the few things that remained after time and your body betrayed you, the interest you accrued to survive the lean years beyond your forties. Like Christmas every year, I saw it coming: adulthood and responsibility, the twin headlights of death's approaching train. So like Nigel in *Spinal Tap*, I turned up my amp, past ten, to eleven, believing that these were the last days—last days of fun, last days of freedom, last of the interesting stuff—believing that fun receded like a tide following graduation. That's how little I knew about anything. I thought that when our

joints ached and blood pressure ran high, when we were tied to bleak office jobs to finance thankless teens, all we would have to look forward to was what we could look back on. That to endure this grim future, all a person could do besides run away and start over was relive golden moments, moments like this, and find comfort that yes, we may be old, but the Earth is a big fascinating place, and we at least experienced a bit of it.

What was the alternative: We sure watched some great television? Hell no. Go down the rabbit hole.

My ass felt wedged in that hole.

This made me think of Alice and the White Rabbit, and of the Cheshire Cat and the Queen of Hearts, in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. And that tea party scene, my god. All those characters with the big heads and exaggerated features. What colors! And why did the Mad Hatter keep that "10/6" card in his hat band anyway? 10/6 of what, his mind lost to mercury poisoning? Or was that just his little trademark?

It made me wish I had a trademark: a herringbone fedora, maybe; rainbow suspenders over a shirtless chest; a cane with a skull handle and fake ruby eyes. Something, some signature look. I looked like a homeless skateboarder who just stumbled into town after three days lost eating bark in the woods. A total dirtbag. Or that's how I felt. How were you supposed to feel when you nearly kill the most important person in your life?

Kari laid in the bed without moving, eyes on the ceiling. She looked dead.

Tick.

I thought I heard the big black arm of the wall clock move.

Tick.

I was pretty sure that was it. What else in this morgue room had moving parts?

I held my breath and listened for the tick.

Nothing.

Maybe the nurses were standing outside our door listening in, straining to hear what would confirm their suspicions. Or watching us through the gap between the frame and the door. Covertly, I redirected my gaze, as if it was a spontaneous act. Nothing.

Tick.

Maybe it was just the clock.

How long were we supposed to stay in here anyway? Ten minutes? Ten hours? No one told me. No one said, "Just wait here until the blotches fade and those devil red eyes turn white again." No one said, "Notify us tomorrow if she still can't feel her big fat freak feet." Or maybe they had and I'd forgotten.

Tick.

What if they were holding us until the cops arrived? Seriously. That wasn't beyond the realm of possibility. They could be stalling us while telling officers on the front desk phone, "Yes, they're in Room 6A, wearing cutoff green army shorts and Converse, no socks. No, the plates say Arizona. Oh yes, we'll keep them busy."

I stood there and planned my speech. How I'd talk to the police as calmly as I'd talked to so many convenience store clerks and all-night Mexican restaurant staff during my late teens, when my friends and I seemed perpetually stoned.

After five seconds of thinking, I couldn't remember a word.

What?

I looked at Kari. Her mouth pinched shut, gaze in the ceiling panels.

I mean, should we just expect that nurses will eventually come in and tell us when to go? Maybe we were waiting for some fancy medicine to counteract the bee venom. Someone should have told us how long that chemical reaction takes; we can't just putz around patchouli-stink Eureka all day. While Kari was clearly no longer in danger of death, my metabolic clock was ticking. In another hour, I'd be peaking like her, and then who knows what would happen. I might start hanging tongue depressors from my lips to impersonate a gopher, or find myself staring into a mirror cackling at the lunar landscape of pores on my face, wondering how I ever thought I looked like Luke Skywalker as a kid, with his deep butt chin. I'd probably end up composing lyrics to fictional songs about caveman bowlers to the tune of "Like a Rolling Stone," a song which I hate. I always told myself that I may eat mushrooms, but I'm no hippie. I pictured the nurses administering Kari a bee venom antidote via IV in some cold steel room down the hall—the "Insect Victim Wing."

"What medicine'd they give you in there?" I whispered.

Kari stared at me a moment then said, "I don't know."

Uh oh. If I asked somebody how long we should stay, what if they told me, "We already told you." Then I'd really look messed up. I stood there thinking, looking at my arms—all long and gangly, like human arms hanging from the furry shoulders of an orangutan. But wasn't it weird to just stand around here waiting? *That* seemed crazier than asking someone.

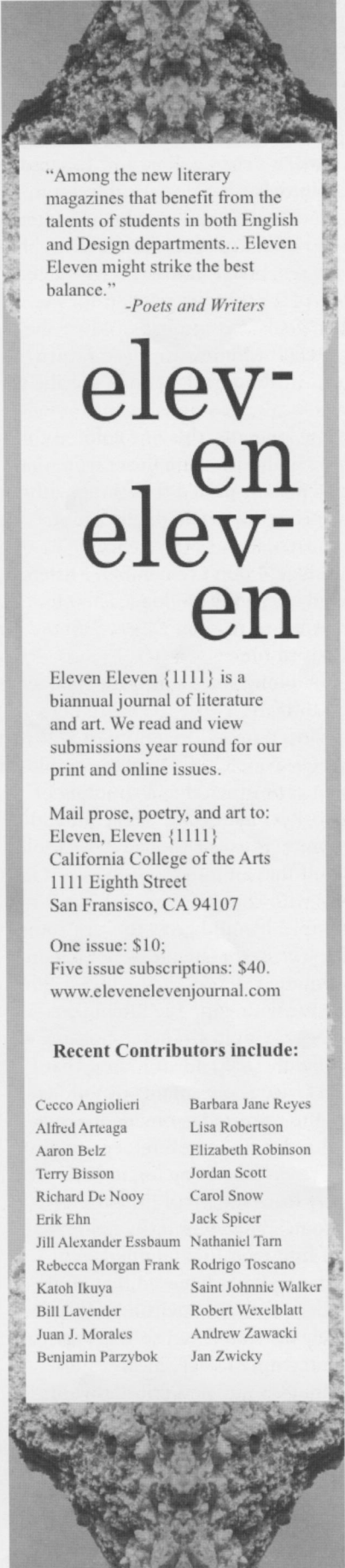
Kari stared at the ceiling, arms at her side. She looked as I had imagined she'd look when I imagined her at her funeral from the bee "evenomanation" or whatever, before my eyes swelled shut from the beating her brother, sister and parents would give me for killing her. Before they pressed charges.

I glanced at the wall clock. We've only been here five minutes? That can't be right. I looked at my watch. It showed the same time.

To get a sense of how much time I had before the mushrooms kicked in, I considered asking a nurse to describe the stages of Kari's healing. Then I remembered the nurses. They intimidated me. It felt like they were judging me. "Thinking he's Thoreau," their eyes seemed to say. "Getting this poor girl stung like that. If that was my man, I'd dump his ass faster than he could say 'don't go.'"

Dumped. That was my greatest fear. Not rattlesnakes or bear attacks. I had spent the bulk of those past four college years and most of high school single, yearning for companionship, assuming love was reserved for other, more mature people. Finally I had met Kari, this gentle, responsible, sweet, stable woman with the most loving, maternal streak I'd ever encountered in anyone, and inevitably she was going to leave me. Though she never said it outright, the implication was clear: she planned to have children with someone someday; was I up to the task?

She wanted it all: kids, a house, good job, a family. Normal human urges that, with the exception of the house, I didn't share. She worked at a day care, later a Montessori school. She studied Sociology, with a special interest in child psych. Without apology or hints of post-Feminist guilt, her stated life



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goal was to have kids and be a mother. I found that both charming and enviable—an outwardly focused life, completely selfless. I went so far as to consider her wholesome, the kind of woman my dad might have fallen for growing up in the fifties in small-town southern Arizona. Kari and I shared few interests besides our interest in each other, but at least she had interests. I'd met people whose sole hobbies were sex, booze and TV. Kari watched tons of TV, but her passion for her alien goals was inspiring. When she started at Montessori, she'd return from work most days and describe the small-scale accomplishments of her young students: this one colored this thing without eating the crayon, that one cut-and-pasted that thing without smearing his face with glue, something about vocabulary or science or numbers. I don't remember. I listened, asked questions, nodded. Then I returned to reading *Desert Solitaire* for the third time.

I had long since soiled my innocence and thought it wise to absorb hers. I convinced myself that opposites attract because people's differences complement each other, that a coupling of opposites creates two whole individuals. On numerous occasions I'd even told myself that although I didn't want kids now, with enough time and Kari's example, I would grow to want some. Lies. The desperate pleas of a man thumbing rides on the highway: "Please take me with you," the hitchhiker screams, "I'm lost! There's nothing else out here!" Deep down I knew that I didn't care about infants or toddlers. Just the word *toddler* made me queasy. It sounded like an excretory function, or a verb: "The poop log *toddled* precariously from the tip of little Mikey's bottom." Why voluntarily invite that stuff into your life? Granted, as an outdoorsman, I believed that clean hands and sterile environments were hugely overrated, but so was parenting. Uninterrupted sleep, meals eaten without onesies and cribs crowding your kitchen table, doing whatever-the-hell you wanted whenever-the-hell, that was the good life. I'd seen enough movies: few people know what they have until it's gone, except me. I knew one day Kari would be gone. I just wasn't going to hasten her departure.

It might be true what that hippie bumper sticker says, that not all those who wander are lost, but some of them must get lonely. They have to. When I imagined the life Kari and I could have together, I imagined a lifetime of acting

"Look," I pictured myself saying to Kari while putting on a pair of "Cow condoms."

like I wanted it. It would be her life we'd be living. Why couldn't I tell her that? Just be honest and admit it? Instead, when I thought about this, I thought back to how single life felt before her, and I hoped that maybe if I hung in there long enough, select parts of her personality might still rub off on me. That maybe Kari's normalcy could envenom me, that her stability might attach itself like twigs on a shoelace, so that her visions of a future would become my visions. And if Kari wouldn't stay, then maybe she could fix me before she left.

She looked at me from the bed. Her eyes were still red, but slowly growing whiter. "Hey red eyes," I thought. "Can you see that I'm evil?" I looked away, at the walls. Pastels. The kind of ice-cream-social colors you put in a baby's room. Which was another thing that made me queasy: the way people always probed into your parenting instincts. Tell them you don't have any, and they thought probing deeper would reveal the hidden truth.

"Don't you want to create life?" they said.

"I'm already creating one," I said, "my own. One free of pediatrician appointments and breast milk pumps."

"Come on," they said, "what about preserving your family lineage?"

And I said, "My four half-brothers are preserving it already."

"OK," they said, "as a naturalist, what about preserving the species?"

"Eleven million people are born monthly. The earth does not need one more successful *copulater*."

What sort of parent would I make anyway? My girlfriend was covered in spots. Two shriveled house plants slumped in my apartment. I didn't have

a credit card, couldn't balance my checkbook. Sometimes I turned in my school work late. When I was sixteen, I didn't know you had to put oil in your car, and one hungover morning after hearing some pings, my engine locked up. My first car, my first six months of driving, and I was already on my second engine. How many marriages would I have to ruin? How many times would I have to lose my kids in a national park, or get them stung by scorpions while camping, before people accepted what I told them? Before I accepted it, openly?

I should have fessed up, told Kari right there: "You deserve a better man."

She would figure it out eventually. How restless I got watching TV with her on sunny Saturday afternoons. The way I suggested we do something other than see a movie each Friday night. My complete lack of daddy-fantasies. She was smart. She noticed more than she let on. So why bring it up? I was a land speculator in the land of the lonely. I refused to rush back to my old vacant lot.

The wall clock ticked.

My eyes burned, stings itched.

Where were those damn nurses already? Waitresses at Denny's at least visit your table every few minutes to top off your water.

"Pssst," I said to Kari. "Hey." She looked over. "Onth you fleel up to it, we'll haul ath through the Coathst Range. It'th still early enough. We can make it to Thacramento, maybe flur-ther." Words wiggled like snakes from my mouth. My tongue stuck to the roof of it. Lips stuck together. To speak, I had to peel everything apart, sealed as it was by what felt like plaster. Licking didn't help. Were they shellacked gooey white? I started to ask but thought better of it. We both needed to believe everything was under control.

I smeared my lips with ChapStick. It tasted like medicated surfboard wax, cherry plus preservatives plus plastic plus fat. I took a sniff. Took a lick. Then I ran my teeth across the top to shave off a bite. It tasted just as bad on my tongue.

"What are you doing?" Kari said.

"Oh just, I don't know. You feeling better?" Her skin was slowly darkening to its Sunbelt bronze. She said she did, though her feet still tingled and the

welts itched and the room was really, really bright. I started to feel the countless points of pain on my body. An unbearable accumulating burn that throbbed and pulsed like the walls of our room. For the first time I thoroughly surveyed my damage: swollen red pyramids, tons of them, up and down my arms, ankles, wrists, and legs. I poked them. Scratched them. Rubbed my shirt across them hoping the rough cotton would provide more relief than my nails. Nothing worked. I wanted to see the welts on my eyebrows, forehead, and ears, but I feared things would spiral if I saw myself in a mirror too clearly.

I said, "Let me go get some calamine for us."

"Wait," Kari said. "Don't leave me alone."

Leave her? This hadn't occurred to me. I was the one leaving our room's quiet shelter. I was the one who had to ask the staff questions then try to sift through the answers, or at least nod a lot. One time this kid in college told me how he took a leak while peaking on acid, and he made the mistake of peering into the bowl. "I flushed the

toilet," he said, "and it was like my whole life went down with the pee. My sanity, my future, my—just everything, it all flushed down the bowl at once."

He snickered when he said it, but the shock of acquired wisdom hadn't dulled through the years. "It scared me to death," he said. I felt the same way.

"I'll be right outside," I said. "Close your eyes and think happy things."

I stepped into the hall.

We had been in that room nearly two hours.

A nurse stood by the front door, arms crossed, staring through the glass at the green world beyond. My truck sat right there, in what I failed to realize was a handicapped spot. When I asked about leaving, she fetched the doctor.

Words came out of my mouth, vocalizations. He looked carefully into my eyes. I imagined a kaleidoscope of color had replaced their natural brown, some swirling of tangerine trees and marmalade skies from a *Laugh-In* set. I pictured my old eyes filled with new fire, bristling crematory flames crackling from the churning furnace of all my mixed intentions. Orange, yellow,

red, flickering and lashing against the expanded black canvas of my dilated pupils. He handed me a square of paper and said, "Get her Benadryl."

Benadryl? I thought, or said. Was he messing with me? You can get that stuff anywhere. It's so benign a compound Pfizer packages the pink pills in pink-and-white boxes. Am I crazy, or is this a joke? Benadryl. So basically, as long as there's a friggin' Safeway or CVS nearby, bees can't kill her? So we don't even have to be here right now?

"That's right," he said, sending adrenaline through my chest. "Same thing you buy at any drug store. Every time you and Kari go hiking, carry a box with you. That's all it takes."

He smiled. I smiled. He knew.

Or not.

"Thanks Doc," I said. "We'll go get some right now."

I drove us straight from Eureka through the Coastal Mountains, turned south at Redding and aimed for Arizona, where for the next two and a half years we each carried secrets, forever our eyes devil red. □

KAREN GLENN

Muslims at the Beach

On the ferry to Langkawi, a Malay girl in jeans
rides on deck, letting her head scarf slide

down her hair until the wind takes it.
On the island, a woman hikes up loose pants,

kickstarts a scooter, head scarf flowing out
below her helmet. In the beach café,

a waitress, head wrapped in white, smiles wide,
mixing mai tais at the swim-up bar.

It's a shock to see the woman in the chador.
She's a black tent, an enormous crowd,

a question mark, a Rorschach blot, a wall.
"Not from here," a Malay matron hisses.

"Maybe an Arab state." The next day it's 93 degrees.
She sits in her beach chair in that chador watching

the waves. Tiny jewels frame the slit that shows
her eyes. Her husband's hand snakes along

her shoulders. What does she think of her bright sisters?
What does she think of me, crossing the strand in shorts

and T-shirt to wade in warm, shallow water? I stare at her,
and she stares back. Without a face, her dark eyes

tell me nothing. Slowly she lifts the veil that hides
her mouth, takes one small taste of orange juice.