

# New Poetry from Lauren Davis: “The Flowers You Brought Back From Italy”



FACES TUMBLING DOWNWARD / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Each time I open my notebook the pages stick.  
Because I've forgotten.

And onto the ground  
they fall:  
royal purple flowers fall  
out,  
emerald stemmed, blue veined,  
life  
from the coast of Italy.

You pulled them from the earth,  
pinched their feet  
with your fingertips,

you breathed into the sea

and thought of the way my hair  
swayed between my shoulders,  
while you once walked behind me  
near an American riverside,  
flowers sway in the field  
the same way.

You placed the poppies then  
into the spine of your bible  
you pressed it,  
punched the face  
and rubbed the back  
onto the ground  
to release water  
into sacred words  
you pressed,  
wanting me there  
and you breathed into the sea.

Yesterday, you stood in the kitchen  
of your new house  
while the songbirds in the yard  
called *good morning*,  
you opened your bible  
and pulled the flowers up  
by the end of their stems  
like tails,  
their faces  
tumbling downward

and I opened myself / my notebook  
and tossed the flowers into

my spine / my book's spine

and there  
I closed it  
and pressed it into the granite  
underneath  
to press  
wanting to stay there with you  
out.

You asked me:  
*when again do you leave?*  
*Two weeks.*

Now,  
one-thousand miles away  
the pages stick  
each time I open my notebook

and onto the ground they  
fall,

and I remember how  
you must have looked  
collecting purple poppies  
by the sea of Italy.

Our modern lives,  
so set apart,  
both  
by miles  
and unsteadiness.

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# New Poetry from Scott Janssen: “Bottle Tree”



VIETNAM DID I / *image by Amalie Flynn*

On my first visit I asked  
A stock question about  
Whether you'd been in the military.

Marines, nineteen sixty-six, you said,  
A hint of menace in your eyes.  
I never talk about it.

On my way out the door

I asked your wife about a  
Tree in the front yard,

Its branches capped with  
Blue and green and pink  
Bottles made of glass.

It's a bottle tree, she said.  
Pointing at a cobalt blue bottle  
Glinting with sunlight,

She told me it had  
Special power to lure in  
Ghosts and lurking spirits.

They get trapped in there, she said.  
Then sunlight burns them up  
So they can't haunt us anymore.

Eight months later  
You could no longer walk.  
I rolled your wheelchair

Onto the warbled porch  
Where we sat and talked  
About how rough life is.

I never told you about  
Vietnam, did I? You whispered.  
I shook my head.

As you spoke,  
Your eyes averted,  
I looked at that cobalt blue bottle

And imagined it slowly filling  
With blood and shrieks  
And grief and the sound of

Rotor blades and the smell

Of burning flesh and the  
Taste of splattered gore

And the sensation of  
Adrenaline pulsing and  
Memories of home and

Buddies who were killed  
And of fear and rage and  
betrayal and weeping

That lodge in your throat  
Before you swallow  
It all down

Into your belly.  
Don't ever tell anyone  
About this, you said,

Your hands trembling,  
Jaw shivering.  
I asked if there was

Anything else.  
You started to say something  
But stopped yourself.

No, you said.

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**New Fiction from Matt  
Gallagher: "The Biggest**

# Little City”

“Been to Las Vegas? Clean. Corporate. Sleek, serious suit. We’re that guy’s kid brother selling Adderall in the parking lot.”

That’s a line I use at cocktail parties and readings and the like. Book people – *literary* people, apologies – tend not to be New York natives (quibble away, *literary* people) so a natural social lubricant is the Where Are You From fancy dance. There are good answers: Georgetown, Paris, Hong Kong. There are bad answers: Tampa, “near” Chicago, Long Island.

And then there are strange answers, answers like Reno, which is my answer.

Home lingers in us all. Mine just happens to smell of sagebrush while sounding like slots.

Really, truly: that’s the first thing anyone notices at the airport. The cheery singsong of slot machines doling out quarters and dimes. (It used to smell like cigarette smoke, too, dense as blubber. Then bin Laden came along and something, something, travelers of the sky can only drink while they gamble. I don’t know. I don’t pretend to understand the world anymore.)

So, Reno. Born in it, raised in it. Mixed feelings galore. Left at 18 with the grace of a startled dog, been gone for about a decade. Back this evening, for reasons I’ll get to. Now, though, I’m waiting for this dear and precious Mormon family of twelve to unload themselves and their matching ash blonde hair from the airplane. They, and I, are the only passengers who remain. All this for a rear window seat.

“So sorry,” the dad says, loud fluoride shine rushing out like sword blades. “Don’t ever have kids.” He pulls down stroller number four and backpack number eight from the overhead bin.

Mormons are breeding for the end of the world, and winning at it. People out east don't know that but they should.

"It's no problem," I say, because I am a fake person.

He keeps talking with affection about the rigors of family life, and while I nod and smile, I don't respond. It's not that I mind his friendliness, aggressive though it may be, or even that I distrust it. It's more that it's draining. Besides, I think, I came home to reckon with the silence of the past. Nothing else.

Mercy eventually intervenes, and we empty the plane. Ascending the jetway, my ears search for the familiar jingles of the shakedown. "Hail, Hail, Hail," they will ring. "Our hometown boy done good." I step into the terminal. Other than the Mormons, it's deserted and dumbstruck. The sound of a faraway vacuum cleaner fills the space between.

In my head, I say, "Hello, Reno," like a slurring British rock star. Some horde cheers in response, made up of fuzzy yearbook faces from yesteryear. In reality, I just nod at the Mormon dad, who's on a knee strapping in his brood. Then I follow the signs for baggage claim.

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I pass the vacant slots. I pass a stuffed brown bear that's been an airport staple since the eighties. I pass a Kaepernick display with photo prints and a signed football encased in glass. He was a college quarterback here, a local legend before he became a national third rail. Some rube attacked the display with scissors last year. Hence the glass.

Near the escalators are neon signs pushing second-rate casino buffets and third-rate lawyers. I recognize one of the lawyers as a high school classmate. MARCO LO DUCA, the sign reads. THE ZUMBA LAWYER. An image of Marco Lo Duca in bright fitness gear dancing in a courtroom grins down as I descend the escalator.



Marco Lo Duca must be a better lover than he is attorney – the gossip cables hath informed that he's dating Sasha Caughlin.

Which is bullshit for a host of reasons, chief among them that I never dated Sasha Caughlin.

I retrieve my luggage and step outside and take a big, sloppy breath of mountain air. That, at least, is as sweet as remembered. Tonic for the body, balm for the soul. The downtown casino lights wash celestial against the dark well of vast sky. Bliss, I think. No wonder those silver miners and pioneers stayed way back when. I've long held that if it weren't for other people, my hometown would be utopia.

"Thrope!" I turn to the call of my teenage nickname. It's Ali, waving from an idling white Suburban parked illegally across a handicap spot. "You goofy bitch, over here." She's shouting four decibels louder than necessary because that's how people like Ali speak. I toss my bags into the back and get into the passenger seat.

"Greetings," she says. "Hello Ali," I say. We exchange a half-hug and she peels out for the freeway like a racecar fiend. Ali is my oldest friend (since sixth grade, we bonded over *Magic: The Gathering* cards and the discovery of sarcasm) and the bestower of my nickname: Thrope, short for misanthrope, earned after one too many ignored video-game invitations. It spread through the suburban hills like wildfire. The jocks called me Thrope. The druggies called me Thrope. My sophomore-year girlfriend called me Thrope. So did my senior-year almost-girlfriend. My own sister took to it.

Ali asks if I'm game for some beers. I tell her it's been a long day. We drive to Malarkey's, a pub in the old south. Confusingly, the district has been rebranded by the Chamber of Commerce as midtown. Many locals view it as cynical ploy to attract hipsters from the Bay Area. Perhaps that's true. If so, it's working. Buildings I knew as seedy gas stations and

porn shops are now trendy restaurants and art galleries.

“The hell is happening?” I ask.

“There is no remedy,” Ali says, faux-wisdom coating her words. “If we stopped putting out all carbon, this very instant, the oceans will continue to acidify to the point that coral and shellfish can no longer exist, kicking out the legs of the food chain. Everything. Is. Fucked.”

Ali’s become a doom prophet in our old age. She sends occasional texts to our group chat about the coming fate of the anthropocene. (I didn’t even know that word a year ago and I’m the writer.) Ali’s not an environmentalist, mind you – I’m not sure she even recycles.

“Dude. I meant the gentrification.”

She laughs, then points to the center console. A worn copy of my book sits there, wedged between the gear shift and a cupholder. “Gonna need to sign that.” I nod. I’m not sure how Ali feels about her character’s depiction. She’s never brought it up, which I appreciate. She’s probably pissed. Most are.

We take a corner table. Malarkey’s has that chic warehouse aesthetic going on, complete with chalkboard menus. Novelty beer tap handles line the bar like sentries, little guitars and wolf heads denoting different craft brews. A mural of Kaepernick kneeling against the American flag covers the far wall, framed by an angular silhouette of Nevada. I don’t know art but it seems like good art. It’s also quite the political statement for a local business to make. As with the nation as a whole, Kap’s anthem protests have divided our hometown.

The only other people in the pub are an old man in all denim and a cowboy hat and a group of white, bearded twenty-somethings staring into their phones. “It’s Sunday,” Ali explains. “Band night on the other side of midtown.”

I don't know what any of that means so I order the most commercial beer I see.

The thing I want to talk about, the thing I'm back in Reno for, seems like the kind of thing to ease into. Instead I ask Ali about Marco Lo Duca, Zumba lawyer. This is the right string to pull; a holy crusade of expletives forms across the table. Ali's a lawyer, too, and from what I can tell, a good one – an assistant district attorney who has served as our group's legal counsel for years, from our friend in tech selling his start-up for *beaucoup* coin to advising our aid-worker friend through her divorce. Ali can't stand lawyers who advertise, like Marco Lo Duca. Ali can't stand lawyers with reputations for swindling lower-income clients, like Marco Lo Duca. Ali can't stand lawyers who went to shit law schools, like Marco Lo Duca, yet who still have become citizens of local renown, like Marco Lo Duca.

“And now he's fucking Sasha Caughlin!” Ali shouts this five decibels louder than necessary, causing the bartender and the man in the denim to look over in irritation. That's it, though, as Ali is 6'2 and rugby thick. “The world's a cruel and unjust place, Thrope. Beyond salvaging.”

“And how's Paula?” I ask.

“That's Doctor to you, son,” Ali says, raising her fingers for another beer. Paula is Ali's wife and an anesthesia resident at Saint Mary's Hospital. They're bona fide, a true power couple as these things go. Not elites – this part of the west doesn't have those, at least not in the eastern sense of the word – but still, known. Moneyed. Both families have been in the area for generations; Ali's dad is a regional supermarket baron while Paula comes from a venerated Basque clan that owns cattle ranches and produces a senator every forty years or so. Perhaps most significantly, Paula's uncle was the head football coach of the 2001 Hidden Valley Indians, the last northern Nevada team to win state in the big-school division.

(Vegas high schools dominate everything now, much to the consternation of the various has-beens and never-weres among the Reno dad population.)

Belatedly, Ali recognizes the intent behind my question. "She's fine. We're going to try again in the spring, we think." After a strained beat she adds, "She's over that business being in the book. You wouldn't be staying with us, otherwise."

"It's a novel," I say. "Fiction. Borrowing from life, it's the job."

"Mmm." Ali does something with her mouth that conveys both skepticism and acceptance. I wonder what she thinks about my use of their personal tragedy. It's maybe my second biggest regret from the book. Before I muster up the courage to ask in a roundabout way, she asks if I'm dating anyone in New York.

"Here and there," I say, which is true.

"Poor bitches. Communicating their feelings to you must be like trying to negotiate with a vending machine."

We drink two more rounds then call it a night. I ask if Ali's good to drive, she laughs and flashes her ADA badge. I stare at her, hard, until she rolls her eyes. "Seriously? Four beers on a full stomach. Wasn't *that* long ago I spent my Saturday nights out-chugging Kap's o-line. Get in the car, princess."

She may not be feeling the drink but I am. We roll smooth through the streets of Reno on a magic carpet of SUV might. I'd forgotten how quiet everything is here, the kind of quiet that chews up human folly and human triumph and spits it back out into the high desert like little bones. The Bonanza Casino shoots a searchlight from its roof, casting the strip of fast food restaurants across from it in half-shadows. The east coast doesn't have good fast food, I think. No Jack in the Box. No In-N-Out. Carl's Jr. goes by some charlatan name which

stales the cheeseburgers, somehow.

The Bonanza searchlight sweeps across the intersection to our front. We went to school with the Bonanza kids, the Rouhanis, who came and went in stretch limos. My mom likes to say that people in the casino industry don't understand *The Godfather* films are a critique and not a celebration, and then lo and behold, the Rouhani parents got arrested for federal tax evasion. I believe the kids run the casino now, which, hey, I think, good for them. As long as they're paying their taxes. Uncle Sam always gets his. Why don't the libertarians out here grasp that? Fever cowboy logic leftover from the old days.

All of this will be Great Basin fossil someday, I realize. The Jack in the Box. The libertarianism. The Bonanza limos. All like that ancient dinosaur fish whose name no one can spell. I unroll the window hoping to hear something. The churn of the river. A siren. Maybe a distant coyote howl. Instead there's only more annihilating silence.

"Good of you to come," Ali finally says. "Leaving after the memorial?"

"That evening." I pause, swallowing to wet my throat. "True he collapsed directing traffic?"

Ali nods. "Morning drop-off. Died as he lived. Yelling at idiots."

We share a laugh. Mr. Flores had indeed enjoyed yelling at idiots, something our high school provided ample opportunity for.

Ali and Paula live on a sleepy cul-de-sac in a bungalow near the river, in a neighborhood we used to call "near the river." Who knows what nonsense it goes by now. A few blocks out, we drive parallel to Lake Street and the old city arch. "Reno," it reads in clean steel lettering. "The Biggest Little City in the World."



“A good title, really. *The Biggest Little City*.” There’s not a drop of inflection in Ali’s voice. “Gets at the duality of it all.” She’s talking about my book. Nevada literary legends tend to use broad, mawkish titles like *The City of Trembling Leaves* and *Sweet Promised Land* for their testaments to our home. I stole mine from the fucking arch.

“Yeah,” I say through a yawn. “I got that much right.”

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Saint Ignatius was, and remains, the only private high school in Reno. Can’t speak to the current student population, though I’d guess the makeup’s about the same: 150-ish students per grade. One-third of those from old Reno, good Catholics baptized in the church who tithe and confess with regularity. These folks form the bedrock of northern Nevada, hard middle-class and proud Republicans since the days of Ike. Their kids skew toward nice and interesting enough, though no one’s meaner than a Reno Catholic teen set on it. These select

jackwagons become Saint I's linebackers and social merchants, year after year, decade after decade, rinse and repeat.

Another third of students come from new Reno, everything from lapsed Catholics to [insert prim Protestant sect here] to Jewish. (Yes, Reno does have Chosen People.) These kids come from both coin and fast crowds, so their parents determine that sending them to Saint I's will cure their little darlings of their drug/alcohol/sex habits. Problem is, other parents with the exact same issue settle on the exact same solution. It's like sending a bunch of angry young terrorists to an island prison and letting them further radicalize each other. (That's a great line, I know. Used it in my novel.) This is why Saint I's has a reputation as a party school.

The last third of students go to Saint Ignatius for academic and/or small-classroom reasons: a gray-haired band of geriatric college professors teach the honors courses. That's why I went, that's why Ali went, that's why most of our friends went. There's overlap and exceptions in that sweeping overview, of course, because life is always more complex and layered than memory allows for. But human minds must dissect and categorize, if not for order, at least for the guise of it.

Anyhow. That's the ecosystem in which we all met Mr. Flores, and where he became my mentor. He was the first teacher in my life to tell me to read widely and write free. He was the first teacher in my life to say that I possessed a gift. He believed in me, as few ever had, as few have since.

I repaid all that by making him the antagonist of my novel, severe and draconian in ways he only feigned at in real life. He never forgave me for it. Then he collapsed dead in the Saint Ignatius parking lot directing morning traffic, yelling at idiots.

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I wake in the guestroom of the bungalow, unsure where I am. Awareness comes as I sit up and look out the sliding glass door to a narrow garden patio. The door is cracked, a low October bite nipping through it. A pile of golden-brown leaves sits in a corner of the patio, waiting to be picked up like a dutiful child after school. I close my eyes and take in a sloppy breath of clean morning air.

I'd stay here forever, I think, but for this dash of hangover lurking about my skull.

Ali has already left for work but Paula sits in their kitchen, sipping from a mug of coffee. She asks if I want one and I join her at the kitchen counter. We small-talk so we both can inform Ali later we did so.

I tap the most obvious vein first, doctoring. She hadn't gone to medical school thinking about anesthesia, she begins, and we're off. She's lopped her hair, I notice, into something like a bob. It's a striking change. Years before, a dark scarlet sheen fell from her head like a waterfall. I'd probably have fallen in unrequited love if I hadn't found something about Paula so deeply unknowable. Then I'd thought it an elusive dreaminess, the result of talking to too many horses on her family's Washoe Valley ranch. With time, I realized it was just apathy. She didn't share Ali's (and my) appreciation for whimsy and bullshit. She didn't have time for people who weren't going to help her achieve her goals. I'd admire it if I hadn't been assessed disposable.

"And your family?" she asks, bringing me back. My mind had drifted from the conversation. "How are they?"

"Same ole'," I say. My parents filed for divorce the day after my little sister left for college and both were gone themselves within the year. My mother retired after twenty-two years as a paralegal at the local power firm Donner Douglass & Hagen, moving home to Virginia, while my father – the last



Porsche executive still in Reno after the headquarters fled in 1997 – finally joined his comrades in Atlanta. A beat late, I remember Paula was one of my few friends to visit with my mother during that long year.

“My mom sends her love, of course,” I manage.

“She’s great. I know you know that.” Paula liking my mother more than she likes me is one of those unknowable things I was going on about. “So. Gonna see the big sights? Saint I’s? Maple’s? Rattlesnake Mountain?”

These are oblique references to my book. Paula thinks Saint I’s is full of “privileged mediocrity.” (Did she actually say that or is it something her character said? I can’t tell the difference anymore.) My first summer job was at Maple’s Casino, where the valet overlords judged me tender because I couldn’t yet drive stick. I became a health club attendant instead, and occasionally, older gay men would hit on me while I collected towels in the locker room. This experience served as the crux of Chapter 3. Rattlesnake Mountain (a lonely, dusty hill in the old southeast) was where a young maiden claimed my innocence, a historic moment forever dignified in the final pages of Chapter 6.

“Getting lunch with Robert Bonilla, actually.”

This makes Paula smile. Everyone likes Robert. Thinking her intimations an opening, I begin to stammer out an apology. She cuts in after eight words.

“I’m glad you’re here. Say hi to Robert for me.”

With that, coffee with Paula is over.

I shower and shave and think about the nature of forgiveness, who should seek it, who gets to issue it. I lock the front door, as instructed. The day smells of pine needle and kerosene. To the near east, saws of black smoke mark what’s

left of industrial Reno – most everything that can afford it has moved to rural Storey County, where Tesla's built a gigafactory. To the hard west, the snow-tipped Sierras shoot from a meadow of sun-browned tumbleweeds, giant earth castles shaped by a manic god. Today's sky is big, I observe, even by the standards of the west. On the sidewalk across from the bungalow someone has spray-painted a note in money green. "ARE YOU HELPING," the sidewalk asks. "ARE YOU HURTING."

Walking north, it doesn't take long to hear the crawl of languid water. The Truckee is more creek than river, but I don't tell that to the ducks paddling about its reedy banks. They're nostalgic holdouts, I decide, clinging to a summer that's never returning. I make a mental note to walk back this way with bread. A noon bell tolls, but from where I'm at, I don't know if it comes from a church or casino.

I find Robert on a bench in front of the old Riverside Hotel. The city was founded in this very spot in 1859 by an entrepreneur who built a log bridge over the river and began charging mining prospectors for its use. The hustle endures. A sign promoting an upcoming poker tournament at Maple's rises from a pole next to the bench, everyone in the photograph smiling with big carnivore teeth, winners and losers alike. This strikes me as off. The summer I worked at the health club, a state assemblyman shot dead a Chinese high roller in the VIP poker room. I wanted to see the body but security wouldn't let me in.

Robert's wearing new cowboy boots, faded hipster jeans, and a striped button-up open at the collar to let flow his chest hair. Dark, carefully-cultivated stubble swathes his face. He looks up as I approach and I see a pale reflection of myself in his metallic sunglasses.

"Thrope." He puts out his hand and I help him up. "I bring bad tidings."

“Oh?”

“Sasha Caughlin. Marco Lo Duca. It’s a belligerent act.”

“Good for them?” I try. Robert shakes his head. “The world’s beyond salvaging,” I offer next. He nods at that.

Robert’s our friend who got rich, the one who sold his tech start-up with Ali’s help. He splits his time between San Francisco and Tahoe, an amateur angel investor and ski junkie. Ali’s taken to calling him “The Baja Globetrotter” because of a predilection for the foreign-born. Like all professional romancers, Robert plays bashful when pressed on it, smiling distantly before changing the subject. He’s come a long way from the boy who flew his desk around science class pretending it was the Starship Enterprise.

The ground floor of the old Riverside is now a grill known as Comstock Willy’s. We decide to eat there, taking an outdoor patio table. Ska punk pumps from unseen speakers, a form of music you don’t hear in New York, I think. Too jumpy.

An old woman in an electric scooter rolls by, a large plastic cup of coins primed for the slots wedged into a front basket. She’s attached to a portable oxygen tank and a miniature American flag flies from the scooter on an antenna. I can’t help but notice the message on the woman’s outsized tee shirt: “SHUT UP AND STAND UP,” it reads. “KAEPER-DICK.”

“There’s no place like Reno,” Robert says, a mystical sort of irony splashing his words. “For all the mortal delights.”

This is a line from my book. I cribbed it from Didion, but the overlap of readers between her and me is limited to my mom’s book club. Robert didn’t mind his fictional rendering, unlike most, though he still insists I exaggerated his libertine persona. Which I may have. Fact and interpretation blurred a long time ago, of both place and people.

We get beers and sandwiches and catch up in a breezy, tranquil way. Some old friendships fray, some adapt, some remain fixed and exact through time and rigor. This is how it is with Robert and I am glad for it. It's nice to pretend at being aimless again.

"I feel like we know them." I follow Robert's eyes into the grill, where a father, mother and three small children have taken nest. It takes a few seconds but I place the parents.

"Jason and Amanda Jankowski," I say. "Class ahead of us. Dated all through Saint I's."

"Ah. They look – " he shrugs. "Like each other."

"That can happen," I say. "Marriage is a face blender."

The Jankowskis' food arrives from the kitchen and they clasp hands and begin to pray.

"Stop, Thrope," Robert says. I haven't done or said a thing.

"What."

"I see the gears moving up there." He shakes his head. "Big-city writer, can't go home again."

I hadn't thought that or anything about the praying family. My mind, really, truly, had been on the river ducks, and the graffiti message on the sidewalk. I tell Robert this, and say that I admire the conviction and sincerity in an act like public prayer. Hell, I say, I could use more of both.

He just shakes his head again. He doesn't believe me.

We finish our sandwiches and get another round. Robert leans back in his chair and crosses his legs, his cowboy boots catching a glint of peeking sun.

"Flores, dead and gone." I tilt my head. "You guys ever ... " He trails off, not finishing his sentence. Whatever word he

intended, my answer remains no.

"Too bad," he says.

"Yeah," I say.

"All because you made him a fake villain who shuts down a pretend student newspaper." Robert and I have had this conversation before, almost word for word, but I still appreciate his going through the motions. "So weird."

"He was a prideful man." I pause. "Though 'Mr. Flowers' as a stand-in for Flores could've been more subtle."

Robert shrugs. For him, the book is someone else's lark, someone else's ball and chain. He's like I was before, free of the burden of others' lives. It's ignorance, perhaps, though without that ignorance I'd never have been able to see it through. Maybe Ali's right about everything being fucked. Robert asks if I want to go to a party in Basque Creek that evening. "Some fancy folk will be there. Good material for your next bestseller! Text Ali, the power couple should come, too."

I don't want to go to a party with fancy folk in Basque Creek. I came here to brood and remember, not to find and enjoy. But Robert's easy swagger has infected the best of us over the years.

"Why not," I say.

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Here's the thing about the book: it did *fine*. People in publishing would call it a *nice* debut. *Solid*. Which means: *middling*. *Ordinary*. *Meh*. Which really means: *On to the next one*.

Did *The Times* review it? Reader, it did not. Did *The Post*? It did not. A Sinclair Lewis scholar reviewed it for *The New*

*Republic* (online only) and found it “engaging in a belabored, post-ironic kind of way ... perhaps this tale of youthful blundering could’ve charmed if only its author had recognized the characters’ complete lack of stakes.” I have reason to suspect that half the hardcovers sold reside in my dad’s basement.

A novel about growing up in Sante Fe came out a month after and sold eight times as many copies. It made every award short-list ever coveted. I met the author in New York at a reading. He didn’t even do me the courtesy of being an asshole.

So. *Middling*. Meh. On to the next one.

But! *The Biggest Little City* did generate some interest in pockets of its namesake. *The Reno Gazette-Journal* ran an author profile, positive enough. The *Sparks Citizen* didn’t hate it, despite the truly terrible things I wrote about Sparks. (“Reno’s crusty sock,” for one.) The alt weekly sketched out a map showing “my” Reno, buoyed by short interviews with people who knew me when, to include one Eugene Flores, honors English teacher at Saint Ignatius High School.

“He always kept an active imagination,” is the entirety of his statement. The weapon of restraint can strike so clean by those who know how to wield it.

Was my intention to malign? It was not. (With the exception of a couple minor characters from the baseball team.) I’ve just always needed to tell things as I see them, straight and clear and bemused, the way an addict needs a fix, the way Chambers of Commerce need hipster midtowns. I’m not saying it’s right. I’m not saying it’s healthy. I’m only saying it is. I’d have done the same to the moon had I been reared there.

But I wasn’t. I’m from Reno. So I wrote about it. Straight. Clear. And so very bemused, not by place, or people, but by the strange and bitter magic of life.

(Yes, I cribbed that line, too.)

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Reno is a place of constant change, which means to survive, it must also be a place of constant reinvention. Robert reminds me of this as we drive out to Basque Creek. When an industry dies, new ones must be found. The old mines and timber mills became marriage chapels and railroads. The prewar shine of heavyweight title bouts and a divorce courthouse fit for Hollywood couldn't be golden age forever. Corporate gaming came, inevitably, for the self-made casino pioneers. Companies from Lear Jet to Helms Construction to Porsche, all local saviors of their time, all empty tombs, now. But hear the old refrain, once more: Reno's back, baby.

"Gigafactory's changed everything," Robert says through gulps of open convertible wind. "Panasonic's leasing space there, making battery cells. Google just bought a shit-ton of land down the road for a data center. Those are the direct jobs. Who's building out that road? A local company. Who feeds all those employees? Local companies. Economic impact's in the billions, easy. That's why tonight's happening. Birthday party for a Tesla exec, sure. But it's also a statement. Of what we are, what we're becoming."

I ask again about an open bar.

We're well past the city limits I once knew. My Reno ended with the waterpark off the freeway. The waterpark marked the edge of civilization. Now, the wilderness beyond has become subdivision after subdivision, sprawled across the valley in a blanket of stucco houses. It smells like drought out here.

"Might as well be Vegas," I say. Robert laughs.

We keep driving. Robert's red Miata begins to crawl up sun-scorched hills like a bug on a picnic table. We keep driving. The orange sun of the high desert fades behind us, slowly. We

come to green manicured lawns and little thumbprint ponds and keep driving. Then comes a marble statue of a bighorn sheep and a sign etched from stone: Basque Creek Golf & Country Club.

I make a joke about the sprinkler bill but Robert doesn't hear me anymore. He's running his tongue over his teeth and checking his nostrils for loose hairs in the rearview mirror, making himself fancy for the fancy folk. I do the same.

We leave his convertible with college-age valets covered in tattoos and furry goatees who possess that young aimlessness I miss so much – they just shrug when Robert tells them to take care of his beloved. He hands over a twenty-dollar bill. They call him sir and say yes, no problem.

We're directed toward a dim ballroom. Hundreds of bodies mill about, the low roar of boozy chitchat ubiquitous. There's an honest to Christ ice sculpture of the gigafactory in the center of the room. Robert wiggles an eyebrow and says he needs to go glad-hand with other techies. He disappears into the throng.

Jeans and cowboy boots surround me like hostiles on an open plain. I'm wearing the only nice clothes I brought, my black funeral suit with no tie and scuffed wingtips, and have never felt so New York in my life. Someone asks if I'm the Adderall guy. I go to the nearest bar and order a local Great Basin beer to show the others that I'm one of them. Then I park myself against a column and crowd-watch, because, well. I am also Thrope.

For the many people I don't know or recognize, there are some I do. The old mayor who lived near us, which meant our neighborhood always got plowed first after a snowfall. The fourth wife of a mafioso who inherited all that Tahoe waterfront and turned it into an environmental research center. A tax lawyer from Saint Ignatius who's gone bald.



Another Saint Ignatius grad I could've sworn died of a meth overdose. The hot middle school counselor who's still got it. Channel 2's evangelical meteorologist. The trans snowboarder who brought home Olympic bronze. The libertarian radio host who went on hunger strike during a land rights dispute. Donner (Junior) of Donner Douglass & Hagen. The desert explorer who works with special needs children. And others.

It's a real cross-section of the community.

A club employee in a polo shirt finds me at the appetizer table. "So sorry, sir," he says. "The others are already in the back."

"What?" I say.

The employee's eyes splinter. "Google marketing exec, right?"

It's because I'm the only person around wearing a suit, both youngish and disheveled enough to maybe be from Silicon Valley. Before I set the kid straight, I think, *what the hell*. Some dead writer advised that still-living writers need to take chances. So I tilt my head and say, "What do you think?"

This makes the employee apologize again, and we're off, striding across the ballroom through all the high ceremony Reno can muster. He leads us to a room behind a code. This room feeds to an escalator that takes us to another room behind a code. This room snaps with the brittle chill of too much air conditioning. That's the first thing I notice. The second is that it's filled with some of the most important people of northern Nevada, movers and shakers I've never spoken with but know from reputation and news interviews.

There are about two dozen, mostly men, mostly white, mostly thick, either in the shoulders or the gut. There are the Maple brothers, of Maple's Casino, one smart and one drunk, though no one can tell them apart until happy hour. There's Donner (Senior) of Donner Douglass & Hagen, who's made his name and

fortune lobbying for tobacco and liquor. There's a man in a white stetson whose name I can't summon but know is a big land developer all over the state. (Of places like the Basque Creek master-planned community.)

I spot the Governor (Saint Ignatius Class of 1980) in a far circle near a muted big-screen turned to football. He's wearing a western dress shirt and talking with Tesla suits and an air guard general. The Governor's teeth are dentist-commercial white and I want to ask how he does it. All in this room seem very pleased with themselves, and with one another. I wonder if anyone here has read my book. It seems unlikely. I look again at Donner (Senior), recalling a story my mom told of him in a heated negotiation, reminding the other attorneys he was descended from Donner Party cannibals, and that some things were just in a man's blood.

She'd told the story with respect, proud of her firm's chieftain because he'd won. In the room above the ballroom, I feel a pang of dark regret, sudden and forceful. It's for Mr. Flores. There are so many more deserving villains, I think, than a lifelong educator who devoted himself to literature and good order.

"Mister Google." It's the man in the white stetson, pointing to me with a stubby thumb. "Enjoying the native spoils?"

He means the Great Basin beer in my hand. It occurs me that if I'm to play this role of new prospector I should do it well.

"Drink local, think global," I say. This earns some chuckles and entrance to the near circle of important men.

They're discussing Kaepernick. "Of course you have a *right* to kneel during the anthem," Donner (Senior) says, with all the understanding of a wall. I'm not surprised he doesn't recognize me – it's a giant firm – but bothered, perhaps. My mom worked there twenty-two years. "It's still the *wrong* thing to do."

He looks across the circle, straight at me. "Imagine Silicon Valley thinks different?"

"All depends," I say, because I imagine it does.

Talk turns to the future of the city. The gigafactory's changing everything, they agree, which means the possibilities are endless. Another youngish, disheveled man I figure to be from one of the tech companies asks about the arch. It seems outdated, he says.

"It's an icon." The man in the white stetson speaks with volume, the gobbler under his chin shaking with authority. "A reminder, in its way. Now, a new city slogan? Some of us have been looking at that."

"I still like 'Reno Rising,'" one of the Maple brothers says. Most everyone else groans.

The man in the white stetson squares himself toward me. It remains cold in the room but his eyes probe colder. He's short but broad and full like a shovel head and it's easy to understand, in this brief nugget of time under his stare, how he's attained power. "You tech kids are good at this," he says, speaking in a slow monotone packed with old Nevada cunning. "Any flatlander ideas?"

For a few seconds, I realize, I have the rapt attention of men who affect change. This is no insignificant thing. Their techniques might not always be clean and their intent might not always be pure, but hey, I think, that's life in the wild west. I want, desperately, to provide what they seek: something good and true for our city.

It comes like genius lightning.

"How about," I say, "Reno: for all the mortal delights."

A long, strained moment passes, then another, and then all the important men laugh, at once and together, at one of the most

beautiful lines ever written about their home.

\*

*Mr. Flores –*

*Hope this finds you thriving at Saint I's and otherwise. All good here – New York's a beast of a city, but I'm learning to navigate it. Through much trial and error, I've taught myself how to sear pork chops and vegetables. A welcome break from Chinese takeout.*

*I've emailed you a couple times with no response. Did my book offend? I'm truly sorry if it did. It just kind of tumbled out that way, and I thought I'd have plenty of time to edit and revise and change things. Then it found a publisher, and things happened so fast ... the newspaper thing was unfair to you (well, Mr. Flowers). For what it's worth, you weren't like that at all as a teacher. You were judicious and thoughtful. If the character wasn't nuanced enough, the fault is mine. Like you used to tell us in class, "Be better next time." That's my aim now.*

*Be well, Mr. Flores.*

He never replied to that message, either. So I stopped trying. What's a man to do? Mr. Flores wasn't the only one trying to reconcile hidden pride with someone else's memories.

\*

I escape the air-conditioned room before the important men grasp who I am not. Talk had turned to zoning laws and Donner (Senior) seemed to be sorting my face through his memory annals. Besides, I'd gotten what I needed.

Flatlander, I think. Hurtful! But also: a great insult.

The next book will get much use from it.

My mind's whirring with plot ideas as I return to the ballroom. I look for the club employee to ask for a pen and bar napkins. So many villain options, I think. The challenge will be deciding who to emphasize. The man in the white stetson seems an obvious frontrunner.

It'll need to be third person, of course, to prove I have the range ...

"Thrope!" It's Ali, four decibels louder than necessary, standing near the ice sculpture. She's doing something with her face that conveys both amusement and alarm but it's not until I'm steps away that I realize why: the stranger she's talking with isn't a stranger at all, but Sasha Caughlin.

I remember to breathe, smile and hug, in that order.

"Hey, Thrope," Sasha Caughlin says. "Been a while."

She looks up with big, dark eyes and a coy smile, too, and glory be, those tender, pretend hopes of the far past can be realized by the abrupt present. One only needs will it to be.

"Where are you now?" she asks.

"Went east a few years ago," I say, hoping for the effect Yale grads have when they tell people they went to school in New Haven. "How are things here?"

"Freaking Ali! Freaking Thrope!" It's Marco Lo Duca, predictably ruining everything. He slaps my back and Sasha Caughlin settles into his shoulder like a Lego piece. I wonder if anyone else in the history of the world has known personal tragedy such as this.

Marco Lo Duca compliments Ali on a recent case she won before turning his charms on me. "Great to see you, man." He sounds eager, even genuine. "Your book – what an accomplishment. Wow!"

"You wrote a book?" Sasha Caughlin sounds confused and I want to scream into the abyss. "I'd no idea."

"Yeah, babe! A novel. We have a copy at home, in the den somewhere. Funny stuff."

"He was always funny," Sasha Caughlin says. "Weren't you, Thrope?"

I only nod in agreement and stand there, open-mouthed and dead-souled, as Marco Lo Duca explains my own creative offering to the girl I spent much of my youth daydreaming about. He even gets some of it right, in a straightforward, literal-thinking, Marco Lo Duca sort of way.

"Sad that Mr. Flores took it to heart the way he did." Marco Lo Duca purses his thin, stupid lips and then finishes the question no one else has. "You two ever talk it out?"

I shake my head. "Student newspaper thing really upset him."

"Well. That wasn't quite it." Marco Lo Duca grits his teeth and sighs, in that showy way showy people will do, and launches into his tale. He and Mr. Flores hadn't been close in high school, he says, but they bonded later when the older man helped him with law school essays. Had this been around the time *The Biggest Little City* was published? Marco Lo Duca thinks it must've been. He remembers Mr. Flores being excited for me, then confused by what I was trying to say in the book. About Reno, about Saint Ignatius, about him.

"The bit about his character no longer speaking with his grown daughter." Marco Lo Duca's voice is so knowing, so certain, I want to shatter it. "Too much, maybe."

Marco Lo Duca keeps talking, but I'm no longer listening. My novel did contain a sentence about Mr. Flowers' strained relationship with a grown daughter. A short line, a quick line, a throwaway line I'd never thought twice about. Had I

taken that from the real teacher, the real man? I must have, I realize, far too late and far too away to do a damn thing about it. Ali's looking at me from the corners of her eyes with a sharpness I've never before seen directed my way.

I wish Robert was here. Or my parents. They like the book for what it is. They never expected it to be anything else. They never expected it to be anything but a book.

Ali's glare remains fixed on me. It holds and it holds and it holds. Forgiveness isn't a thing or even an aim, I think, too late, always too late. It's a process. A process without end.

Desperate to change the subject, I ask about them. Sasha Caughlin talks about her business development job at one of the casinos. Marco Lo Duca goes into detail about the rigors of Zumba lawyering. Then they say that they're calling it an early night but it was great to see us, and we'll talk again at tomorrow's memorial.

Left with nothing else, I smell Sasha Caughlin's hair as they turn to leave.

I look at Ali. She looks at me. Shame burns through me and I want nothing more than to be under a blanket somewhere, hiding from the world. Ali hails a waiter with a tray of beers. Great Basins, of course.

"Paula's not here?" I ask.

"She's not," Ali says.

"Because of me," I say.

"Because of you," she says.

I close my eyes. Ali's my oldest friend and I've hurt her deeply. The others I'll get over. This one matters, though. She deserves more. She deserved better. I begin to stammer out an apology. She cuts in after four words.

“Another time,” she says. “The fuck were you?”

So I tell her: about the air-conditioned room, and the Governor’s teeth, and the man in the white stetson, and the conversation about the arch and flatlanders from Silicon Valley.

“Sounds crazy, I know,” I say. “But I almost sold that Didion line.”

Ali considers that, then points to the ice sculpture of the gigafactory. “Might help to think about the rising oceans and humanity’s goliath carbon footprint. Little to no chance we’ll slow either enough in the coming decades to keep society from total collapse. This? It’s the End.”

We clink our bottles together in a wordless toast.

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Before the memorial the next morning, I borrow Ali’s Suburban and drive into the foothills of southwest Reno to see my childhood home.

In the mid-eighties, this was the fringe of town, the new master-planned community where all the white-collar casino families and hotshot Porsche execs were supposed to live. My mom wanted a house in old Reno, near the river, a big Colonial Revival along California Avenue. My dad came from a humbler background and besides, the suburbs were the future. The possibilities, well. They were endless.

It’s a shadow blue home at the top of a hill, with a front yard of honeysuckle my mom planted herself and a rolling side yard perfect for summer slip ‘n slides and winter sledding. I never thought much of it as a physical space for the eighteen years I lived in it, it was just there. Where I ate, grew, dreamed. But now, here, I find myself thinking about things like its bright, open dining room and the way the bathroom



faucet water felt in my palms and the peculiar cranny in the garage where my mom found an angry rattlesnake and then killed it by driving our Volvo station wagon over its head forty times.

I park in the cul-de-sac across the street and leave the engine running. The honeysuckle garden remains, though it's more feral than we ever let it grow. There's a strange weathervane on the roof – a black zit on a face of shingles, looking out of place in the way only reality infringing upon memory can. My sister used to rollerblade every day in this cul-de-sac, I remember, until some sixth-grade mean girl told her you can't be pretty if you rollerblade.

The return ticket to New York sits in my back pocket. I know already how today's memorial will go: there will be Catholic pomp. The Saint Ignatius community will turn out in force. There will be scriptural readings but no personal eulogies, no way Mr. Flores would allow indulgence like that. At some point I'll tear up because I'm sensitive, and people around me will think it's because of what happened with the book, but it won't be about that at all, it'll probably be because of something random like the sidewalk graffiti that demanded to know if I'm HELPING or HURTING. Then there will be hugging, much physical hugging, and maybe I'll get to smell Sasha Caughlin's hair again.

I realize my old home must be inhabited by a young family. There are play-patches in the grass and the top of a basketball hoop peaks out from the backyard. This is right, I think. Maybe it's the Mormons from the flight here. Or the Jankowskis. I'd like that.

I consider ringing the doorbell, asking whoever answers if I can look around. But I don't. This way, my old home remains boundless.

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# **New Nonfiction from Erin Carpenter: “Fully Involved: A Trauma-Informed Approach to Date Night”**

## **Part 1: The Healing Shed**

In 2016, my husband burned our guesthouse to the ground. He left a t-shirt over a lightbulb while painting the eaves, and the fire inspector said the motion detector probably kept turning the light on in the wind, eventually causing a spark. Kent works meticulously and always cleans up; I think there was some moonshine involved in this oversight. But it was the year of the Gatlinburg wildfires, and by fall we would be seeing the worst inferno the East Coast had experienced in the better part of a century. Even in April, fires burned in the Big Cove, Yellowhill and Birdtown communities of Cherokee, enough to delay school due to smoke. So like so many things in our life together, he probably doesn't deserve all the blame.



photo: Brian Lary

I woke up bathed in orange light feeling so cozy that it was hard to get out of bed. If it weren't for his service dog's persistent whimpering, I don't think I would have budged. I stepped out onto the back porch and opened the screen door. The fire marshal would write a report using the words "fully involved" to describe the blaze—there was no stopping it, the best we could do was contain it. I got Kent out of bed and he stood still for long enough to yell fuck, fuck, fuck until something in his truck exploded and we started moving again. I gathered our dogs and our daughter Katie and drove to the bottom of the mountain to flag down the firefighters. The first volunteer arrived within seven minutes of the 911 call – he told me later he found Kent up on the roof with a garden hose, wetting down the siding and the deck.

For over a month, we let the pile burn, and salvaged what we could. A page from my thesis director's first novel survived. Our neighbor Jim, a Vietnam vet with a steel plate in his head, asked for the metal hand tools, planning to hammer them back into shape somehow, or sell them for scrap metal. But everything Kent had saved from his infantry years with the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division went up in flames. His BCUs and his dress blues were still back in Idaho at his parents', but he lost the kinds of things that Tim O'Brien might have mentioned.

It took about two years to re-build. We upgraded to a 500 square foot barn-style shed with a deluxe porch package. Half of the space would be used for his workshop and the other half would be shared by me and Katie to host guests, hang out, and have more privacy than the two-bedroom main house could provide. I chose colors from Sherwin Williams' American Heritage collection to appeal to Kent's patriotism—I was still all about pleasing him then. Fireweed red for the exterior, Salty Dog blue in the bathroom. I had him install cedar fence pickets in a shiplap pattern on the walls and he reclaimed wood from the fire to use as a countertop in the breakfast nook. It had rustic charm. I loved it. What I didn't know was that he would soon be living in it.

In February, he was sent home on administrative leave from his position on the road crew of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park because a co-worker blew the whistle on him for carrying a personal firearm in his lunchbox. I had questioned him about this choice over the years, but he had his reasons. The most obvious is he's been shot at, a lot. And although he was not in an urban environment like Mogadishu, he worked in remote locations where people often went to disappear. It can take an hour for law enforcement rangers to respond to a call, and they work alone. In Kent's view, he was protecting himself and his crew. The gun never came out of the lunchbox until it was confiscated, which happened just a few days after the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglass High School in Parkland,

Florida.

I don't like to make excuses for Kent, and as a schoolteacher, I am as concerned about gun violence as anyone else, but just a month or so earlier, he had finally approached his supervisor and asked to bring his service dog to work. The request had been denied. His claim for a service-connected disability rating with the VA had been denied numerous times over the years as well. His relationship with his boss was strained, and his irritability was high. This would be true for me as well if I had finally come to terms with the severity of my condition and found the courage to speak out and ask for help, only to be denied accommodations or even acknowledgment that my experience was valid. So although I always disliked the fact that he carried a weapon in his lunchbox, I believe he was resorting to the only coping mechanism he was capable of at the time. But unfortunately, his indiscretion cost him his career in federal service.

When the National Park Service finally asked for his resignation, he turned to a twelve pack of high-octane beer for solace. I found him lying in the loft of the shed surrounded by storage bins and staring at the ceiling, conscious but unwilling to talk. An hour later, I heard yelling and crashing noises. I had just started watching *The Greatest Showman* with Katie. (The soundtrack would make me cry for a year afterwards.) I went out to find him ripping open and overturning anything that was not nailed down: motorcycles, tool chests that were more like wardrobes, a rack of winter clothes that he had moved out of our bedroom so I could have a closet.

"I'm taking your guns," I said.

"Take them!" he yelled, and I grabbed his Glock off the only upright surface left in the room and left.

I called my therapist who told me to call the police. "He

can't act like that. You have a child." I was afraid for his safety, not mine. I was afraid for my daughter's emotional well-being, though she only complained that I was on the phone too long and wouldn't sit to watch the movie. Having him removed from the property seemed tragic, but so did finding him dead in the shop, so I called the VA-suicide hotline and tried to make him talk to them. He just mumbled about how he was "done." They patched me through to the police.

"Does he have any firearms?" they asked.

"Yes. He has a Glock pistol and a semi-automatic rifle. But I locked them in my trunk and hid the keys and cartridges."

"That's all?"

"Yes." His other Glock, the one in the lunchbox, was supposed to have been destroyed by the authorities after he was found guilty of the misdemeanor of carrying without a permit, but it would be returned a couple weeks later at the federal courthouse in Asheville after the judge decided he had no legal basis for keeping his weapon from him. "Good luck to you, sir," the man had said to Kent. I thought he should be talking to me.

"How does he feel about law enforcement?" asked the police officer.

"He doesn't like them, to be honest."

"And why is that?"

"I guess it's because they're always around when he gets in trouble."

"What about dogs?"

"A rottweiler, a doberman mix, and a mountain cur."

"Are you sure he doesn't have any other weapons? Like a secret

stash?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"My wife doesn't know about half of my guns," he said.

The officer's confession felt much too casual, too conversational for the crisis I was facing in my mind. More than anything, I was afraid for what this incident meant for my life and Katie's, and I knew at that moment that the men on the phone wouldn't be fixing my dilemma. I had never wanted to leave Kent, but had often wondered whether I should, and I was already negotiating with myself on how I could justify staying with a violent man. He would have to stop drinking. He would have to go back to therapy. Maybe he could move into the guesthouse until he was stable.

The officers arrived and strolled over to the outbuilding, but by that time, Kent had apparently climbed out the window (since all of the doors were blocked by the demolition) and wandered off into the woods. I directed them to our neighbor Jim's house, where they found Kent and brought him to the hospital. Knowing he was under someone else's care that night brought a profound sense of relief. I heard myself saying, "I need help. I can't do this alone anymore."

He passed their test. He was not a threat to himself or others, so he was free to leave the next morning. I asked Jim to take him down to the VA in Asheville and let them do a full psychiatric evaluation. I set up the appointment. But Kent was hungry and didn't have his wallet, and so Jim brought him home. I presented my demands. I told him I'd be giving his guns to a friend in law enforcement for safekeeping.

"Fine, but you have to stop drinking too," he said.

I knew I couldn't continue drinking. For thirteen years of marriage, and for many years before, the wine had guaranteed that I could find happiness and some form of companionship at

the end of the day. Kent has never been much of a talker, but a beer or two, or sometimes three or four, would always help open him up. Now the stakes had gotten too high for even my moderate dependency. My husband was going downhill fast. I had watched him destroy things he needed, even loved, out of anger, and thought he might take the rage out on himself. Was I okay being married to someone who could do that? How would this affect my daughter? I didn't know the answer, but I knew drinking made me complacent. I have been sober since that day.

He moved into the shed. Two weeks later, he said he was stable and wanted his guns back. "If you don't give them back, next time I might not be so trusting," he said. He had been sober and attending his mental health appointments. He was either comatose, or irritable, but the bulk of his anger seemed to have turned inward, so mustering all the trust I could find, I met my friend on the side of the freeway, and she loaded his guns into my trunk. I turned them over and invited him to move back to the house.

"I'm good," he said.

Over the next several months, Kent took Katie to school and picked her up from dance. Beyond that, he was a ghost. I'd go out to ask him to eat with us, to come watch a movie, to give me a hug. On a good day, he would turn his face from the TV to say no. Most of the time, he wouldn't even look at me.

"What can I do to help?" I asked.

"Leave me alone," he replied.

"Really? That's really all you want?"

"I'm just trying to stay alive," he said.

So I went back to my living room, where I binge watched Parks and Recreation with Katie, and let her sleep in our King sized bed for the first time in her life. From time to time, I'd try



to talk to him, and fail, or try to seduce him, and succeed. Either way, such a lack of affection was evident that before long the effort became more painful than the loneliness. I thought there was another woman. I knew he wasn't the type, but I couldn't understand it any other way. If it were me, and I was treating him this way, it could only be that someone else was providing some of that lost connection.

"This has nothing to do with you," was how he saw it, and in a way he was right. But I was being told "no" all the time. I would give him his space for as long as I could stand it, and then I would go out again to check on him, to let him know I was still there. I knew he was suicidal, and there was not a damn thing I could do about it except stand by. One day, he went out with his rifle into the woods. I hoped he was with Jim, but of course he hadn't told me anything. I prayed he would come home alive.

He was drinking again—I found bottles in a wheelbarrow under the shed and soon saw him drinking when I popped in to visit. But by then I was going to 12 step meetings. I had a sponsor and a group where I could come undone and re-focus my attention onto myself. I didn't get to decide whether or not he drank. I got to decide whether or not I stayed. That decision alone required all my strength. I had spent six months trying to help heal him with words, but words mean little to those who have lost trust in people, and for a man whose only need or want is to be left alone, my choices dwindled down to one. I finally had the strength to accept that our marriage was over.

I thanked God that I had taken a full-time teaching job to help us pay for the fire, and I would have my permanent license by the end of the upcoming school year. I began to prepare for a different future. I separated our bank accounts. I took him off the credit cards. I told him I wanted to be married to him, but I wouldn't look back on 25 years with someone who didn't want to be with me.

I remember telling Katie on the way home from school that his recliner had shown back up in the living room. She seemed interested if not particularly impressed. I remember him standing in the doorway of my bedroom saying, "Don't give up on me," and coming over to kiss me while I was reading in bed. I remember resisting the urge to get close to him in bed those first few nights, trying to let him settle in, just happy to listen to him breathe.

\*

## **Part 2: The Date Dilemma**

About a year and a half later, I rolled over one Sunday morning and asked Kent what he wanted to do that day. To my delight, he wanted to take us on a full moon paddle that evening. But while we were eating the croissants I had bought for my French class, a text arrived inviting Katie to the haunted corn maze in Asheville.

"What does everyone want to do?" I asked. No one spoke.

"I want us *all* to go. That was the plan," Kent said, as if this had been on the calendar for days and not just an hour. Katie stared down at her plate, and I fought the urge to cover up the silence. Maybe I should make her come. But some time alone with him would be wonderful.

"I win either way," I said. "I'll get a date with my husband or a family kayak trip."

Kent waited through another long pause and left the table. I let the fear of losing him to the TV subside and then turned to Katie.

"It seems like you don't want to disappoint your dad," I said.

"Yeah, because he'll yell at me."

I'm sure mother guilt is one of the strongest emotions at work

in America. If believing we can't be enough for our children weren't insidious enough, infecting ourselves with baby daddy guilt—the sense that you should have done better in choosing a mate—that she deserves better, that you deserve better—is one of the biggest threats to my serenity. It does nothing to clarify my vision and only makes me feel like an idiot.

“Talk to him. It's okay. Nobody's going to get hurt.”

Her scowl turned the volume up on the voices in my head. *Are you sure?* I am aware of how his anger can be frightening, and I want to protect her from it, but after years of walking on eggshells, which only ever fuels anger and resentment on both sides, I have learned to trust them to their own devices. I explained how my fear likes to tell me stories; stories I've learned to ignore. “What stories are you telling yourself?” I asked her.

I was expecting all of them but one.

“I don't want to make dad go kayaking without me. He doesn't seem that into going with just you. I'm not trying to be mean, but he seems really awkward.”

Her words confirmed my fear that my husband didn't want to date me, but I ignored myself. I had heard it time and time again; this was not about me.

“It's okay. Go tell your dad what *you* want to do today.” And she went off to the corn maze with her friends.

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### **Part Three: Power to Win**

Kent pulled our kayaks off the truck while there was still some muted color behind the mountains. Our three-legged Rottweiler climbed into my boat, while the mountain cur tucked in with Kent and his pole, whimpering that she didn't get to go with me. The Doberman had died in August.

“Don’t cut in too close,” he said as we left the shore. “I’ve got a line out.” He moved into the dark shadows created by stacked ledges of slate rock, trying to hook a fish without the effort of casting. They call it trolling. I had to smile, thinking what a great metaphor for my marriage. But then I paddled out into the moonlight and watched it improvise on the water, happy to sit alone with my thoughts.

“Erin, where ya at?” he called out from the edge. “Come to the left.”

He knew where I was, and he wanted me closer. He was keeping an eye on me and it felt like love.

“It’s too dark to fish,” he called.

“How come? You can’t see what you caught?”

“I think I hit something.”

“Like a log?” I asked.

“Like Jaws.” He laughed. It sounded like those seagulls that pass through here on migration. Perfectly natural and totally out of place.

We moved out into the center of the lake. The occasional campfire flared, and drunken shouts and laughter could be heard. We rounded a piece of shoreline with a pine tree clinging to a ragged slope like it was the last bit of land the Earth had to offer. I felt something undermining my rhythm, forcing my body to struggle a bit more with each stroke. I looked back to the trusting eyes of my tired old dog for encouragement.

“Is it me or has it gotten very hard to paddle?” I asked Kent.

“Upstream,” he said.

We had come to that part of Fontana Lake that is also a river.

By travelling for over a hundred miles to be impounded by a 480-foot wall, the Little Tennessee river held enough energy to produce the atomic bomb. What power there is in purpose. I wish I knew with such certainty where I was headed.

When Kent was at his worst, his father came from Idaho to visit and we took him to the dam's release. It would be the only day we spent together during that whole difficult time. The spillway was open, and the spray was so massive that it appeared to form two cumulus clouds. I have a picture of Katie and I leaning against a railing looking like off-duty angels posing before the gates.

I'm not an angel—not that I haven't tried. But commitment to my veteran has taught me this: love is a powerful force, but it does not flow unimpeded, it does not exist to carry me along to my next destination, and its fluctuations are often outside my control. At times we are forced to sit in its backwater, looking closely at how we contain ourselves and where else we can find sources of hope, until enough energy has built up to push us forward.