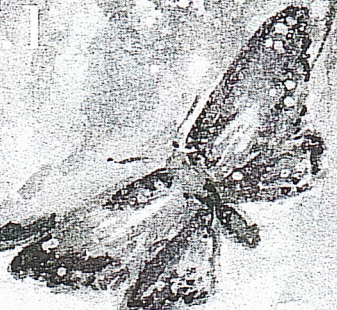




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Life in the Littoral Waters

Robert Schladale

Saturday morning David Mariner stands on a cliff above the crashing Pacific, contemplating violence. At the back of a group of thirty, he feels out of place, a forty-two-year-old who's wandered into a party of college students. A wild-haired man is ranting about the destruction wrought by the power plant occupying the Ventura coastline a quarter mile to the south, and David thinks how easy it would be to incite a melee, to push forward punching and kicking until he takes as many of these bright-eyed eco-freaks as possible over the edge with him. It's what they deserve.

Beside him, a girl turns and cocks her head. "You're Sam's father, aren't you?" she asks. When David startles, she adds, "I knew her from school."

Gulls squeal and the man with the deranged curls gesticulates in his short-sleeve shirt as if excited, or possibly to generate some warmth on this chilly March morning. David is better prepared in his UC Santa Barbara sweatshirt, which he chose because it was his and his wife's alma mater, and their daughter's school. Samantha, their only child, could have gone to Harvard but insisted on staying close to home.

"Sam would be glad you're here," says the girl. Her friendly voice reminds him of his daughter, though her angular cheekbones and prominent chin suggest a wary, defensive nature, and her freckled face lacks Samantha's pretty blue eyes. "We actually joined Coastal Action together," she says. "Sam convinced me."

The rank smell of seaweed billows around him and David wishes this girl would shut up. He remembers Sam telling him that Coastal Action wasn't a bunch of crazies but intelligent people dedicated to preserving the littoral waters—the near-shore region—of California's coast.

Today their focus is the Rivera Generating Station, one of a dozen along the coast that uses sea water for cooling, an inexpensive process that also apparently kills countless fish, seals, otters, and other ocean inhabitants by crushing them against the steel screens of its enormous intake pumps.

The wild-haired man finishes his tirade and a second fellow in an orange sweater takes over. "Next Saturday we'll split up into three teams," he says, explaining that some of them will line the Pacific Coast Highway and hand out educational flyers to drivers stopped at the light in front of the plant, others will picket the gates, and still others will board a small boat with protest banners, symbolically blockading the power plant from the sea. The same simple acts of civil disobedience that Sam engaged in. And that, six months earlier, took her life.

David listens to the fellow in orange and anger floods him. He doesn't give a damn about dead fish. What he wants is retribution. A chance to make these sanctimonious fools pay for what their idiotic protests cost him. *You have no idea what you've done*, he means to shout. But he's pre-empted by the wild-haired man.

"Excuse me? I'm sorry, but we don't know you. If you're from the power company, we'll have to ask you to leave."

David blinks as all eyes turn his way. The power company?

Beside him, the girl puts a hand on his shoulder. "This is Sam's dad," she says.

Faces brighten, but the man with the lunatic hair isn't happy. "So, you're here to—?"

"Help," David says, although helping these buffoons is the last thing on his mind.

The wild-haired man and the man in orange confer. Doubtless, they don't want his help. The black cloud of the Mariner name. The reminder of what happened at the first protest of the Rivera plant last September.

The wild-haired man coughs. "Actually, we have more than enough volunteers already."

"He can come with me on the boat." The girl beside him turns and faces David. "Assuming you won't get seasick."

David shrugs, perplexed by the girl's persistence. She turns to the men at the front. "Okay?"

The wild-haired man stares at her, unsmiling, but says nothing.

Later, after the three action groups have been organized and the group leaders have scheduled training sessions on legal protest practices, the young woman, whose name is Celia, surprises David by asking him to walk her to her car.

"I knew you were Samantha's dad," she says, taking his arm. "I saw you at the accident. You probably don't remember me."

"No."

"We were all kind of in shock."

David's elbow tingles from her touch, and he's embarrassed by the way she leans into him so familiarly. He's about to push her away when he realizes she's limping. Her left foot has a crippled look and turns under as she walks.

"Tell me something," he says, when she stops beside a rusty Toyota Corolla. "Why are you doing this?" It's a question David has wrestled with for months. Why did Sam do this?

Celia opens her door and tells him that the littoral waters are home to more species than any other ecosystem on the planet. "And they're right there. It's sort of hard to grasp because our eyes can't see beneath the surface, but they're our neighbors. We should respect them."

"Respect?" David feels his anger return.

"Sure. Imagine living your whole life in your nice California suburb, and one day you see the family across the street—or your own family—get sucked into a giant pipe and smashed to a pulp. What would you think of that?"

"But we aren't fish. Or seals or whatever."

"Use your imagination," Celia says. "That's all we're asking. Does the rest of the life in the world matter?"

David stares at her foot. As far as he can tell nothing matters.

Driving home he wonders what just happened. He went to the meeting wanting to change his life—destroy it or redeem it, he didn't care. Instead, he stumbled into a girl who, though she looks nothing like Samantha, nevertheless reminds him of her with an

immediacy he can't shake. Not that that matters, because what he wants from this crippled girl is nothing more than sex. A crude, destructive idea: he wants to crush this Celia, to throw her down on the beach and pour what's left of him into her. He wants to pound both of them down into the sand until they are swept away by the surf and drowned in the same blue littoral waters that she, in her innocence, wants to save.

Three blocks from home, David spots a familiar Ford Fusion parked at the curb and recognizes his wife from her jumble of hair. Once a wavy chestnut, Amy's hair has recently adopted the color of steel wool. Workdays she clips it in a knot, but on weekends she lets it go, an unkempt mass that billows out from her skull as if desperate to escape.

Idling behind Amy's Fusion is a sheriff's cruiser. Since Sam's accident, Amy occasionally speeds. "Maybe I'll accidentally hit a pedestrian," she said after her first ticket.

Almost certainly she is returning from the library, where she goes every Saturday to borrow novels in which someone dies and others have to live with it. Carissa, their marriage and family therapist, agreed early on that this might help.

Home, David hustles into Amy's sewing room to check her laptop, searching for clues to her state of mind. Since telling their minister she didn't give a damn if her daughter was with God, she has taken to searching the Internet for information on how to reunite with the dead. Twice she's hired mediums who conducted séances, to no avail. More recently, David came across a page of search results for common methods of suicide. Today he finds a web page listing poisonous foods. Mushrooms, lima beans, nutmeg, red kidney beans. He has tried to talk to her about managing grief safely but all she has told him is not to worry.

He decides to throw some clothes in a duffel, drive to Mexico, never return. Instead, he wanders outside to clean the pool. At the deep end, he plunges the telescoping skimmer down to the drain. When he brings it up, atop the debris in the net lies a field mouse so perfectly preserved he expects it to gulp a breath and scamper away. He sets the net on the deck and waits a long minute, then another. Finally, he carries it to the garbage can and dumps it in.

When Sam died, the county coroner told David and Amy that she died of vehicular trauma. She was handing out flyers at the traffic light where the PCH intersects with the access road of the Rivera Generating Station. Somehow, as the mob of Coastal Action protesters churned at the edge of the highway, chanting and waving signs, she was jostled out onto the pavement. The light was green. The driver of the pickup wasn't even cited.

At work on Monday, David can't focus. He feels like someone trapped in a submersible, staring through a tiny window into a sea of unfamiliar life.

As the manager of a Direct Express fulfillment center that ships two hundred thousand items a day, David has a reputation for paying such careful attention to operating details that his center's turn-around times are among the company's fastest. Lately, however, he's taken to focusing on personnel issues, spending most of his afternoons listening as his Human Resources Chief, problem employees, and their supervisors present conflicting perspectives on various disputes. After each discussion, David makes a decision that, Solomon-like, he hopes will provide something for everyone. By drowning himself in other people's problems, he floats through his days.

At two o'clock, while he sits in the conference room listening to a package handler explain his incessant trips to the restroom, David's private cell phone chimes. The caller ID is one he doesn't recognize, and he offers a quick apology to the others around the table as he answers.

It's the girl, Celia. She says she called to make sure he knows where they're meeting for the protest training on Thursday. He knows, having sailed out of Ventura Harbor a dozen times on his neighbor's Hobie cat, but says, "Give me a sec." He puts a hand over the phone, telling the group that he needs to take this call and can they break for ten minutes?

Retreating to his office, David listens as Celia tells him the slip number where they'll meet, all the while imagining the two of them wrestling in the back of his Ford Explorer. He sees himself yanking off her jeans, grasping her bony hips. And wonders why.

Dead air fills the connection and he's about to say that he doesn't have time for her boat ride when Celia asks, "Do you think it's okay to trust people?"

David sits up straight, spooked by the feeling that she's somehow sensed his bitter fantasy. "Maybe. Why?"

"It's just, my parents fought a lot. When I was ten, my mother went to visit her sister in Texas and never came back. My father promised he'd never leave, but then he drowned when I was fifteen. He was on a boat trying to herd whales away from the coastal shipping lanes, so they wouldn't get hit by the big container ships from China. The bow wave from one of those ships swamped their boat."

"Bummer. Listen, I have to get back to my meeting—" David pushes back his chair and stands, but lingers. "So you knew my daughter from class?"

"Actually she asked to join my study group. I was a year ahead of her—we all were. But Sam was a great addition."

"Oh, so you're a junior."

"Yes."

David sits down in his chair. "Majoring in ocean science."

"Marine science."

"And you live on campus? Near the beach?"

Celia offers a light laugh. "Questions, questions!"

"Boyfriends?"

"Please. College guys are so immature."

"So you spend your Saturday nights curled up with a good textbook and a mug of cocoa."

Celia breaks into laughter. "No, David. I do heavy drugs and run around the campus naked."

David laughs so loud he has to cover his mouth with his hand.

"I won't ask you what you do on Saturday nights," Celia says, and there is no mistaking the tease in her voice. "I'll just use my imagination."

David feels his thoughts melt away.

And then she is back where she began. "Anyway, what I was trying to say is that I know what it's like to lose someone. I guess that's why I called."

"Thanks. I think I'll survive."

“You will.” Celia speaks with conviction. “One day, in one moment, things will change. It’s like a break opens up in the fabric of time, like a black hole for sorrow, and a moment later it closes, and all the hurt is gone.”

“Good,” David says, though the truth is he doesn’t want to forget. What he wants is to remember so well and so completely that, by dint of mental power alone, he will bring his daughter back.

Amy’s shift at County General, where she supervises a team of ten nurses and aides, begins at seven a.m. Most days she’s out of the house before David has breakfast. But Tuesday when he comes into the kitchen her purse is on the counter, a trio of amber bottles nestled inside. Zoloft. Wellbutrin. Valium. Ordinarily they reside in the medicine chest above her vanity. The house is silent, and David thinks about breaks in time, black holes, and what exactly goes away when someone dies.

“I thought I’d stop by Ivy Lawn this morning,” Amy says, coming in with her coat.

“Oh.” David stares at a box of Wheaties. A month ago, during one of their counseling sessions with Carissa, Amy said she thought it was time to start letting their daughter go. Instead, she’s increased the frequency of her visits to Sam’s grave.

Amy grabs her purse and David nods at the pill bottles. “Sure you want to take those? I mean, well, the sun could diminish their potency.”

Amy steps away from him. “Or I could just sit down beside her headstone and take them all. Is that what you’re thinking?”

David raises his hands, miming innocence.

“Talk to Carissa next time.” Amy removes the bottles and slaps them down on the counter. “You never say anything.”

When Samantha was an infant, Amy monopolized her care so much that David called himself the “relief parent.” But as she grew, she discovered the pleasure of wrestling with her father on the living room floor, of having him swing her above the surf at the beach, of kicking a soccer ball back and forth on the lawn. Theirs was a joyous physical bond, and even into her teenage years Sam retained the

habit of sneaking up and throwing herself onto his back, hanging from his neck and doing her best to topple them over. Occasionally she succeeded.

At his office Tuesday morning, David spends his time eyeballing inventory reports and daydreaming of Celia, the usual dream of carnal absurdities. He can't understand why the dream obsesses him. Three times he picks up the phone to call her, to ask her to meet him at a motel. This, he knows, would instantly terminate their pointless relationship. But each time he presses her number he hangs up. Then, while he's eating lunch at his desk, Celia calls.

She asks him if he has any ideas for something to mount their pennants on; they've sewn together colorful flags emblazoned with SAVE THE COAST, large enough to be read from shore. But the plastic sprinkler pipe the team fastened them to last time flexed so much the pennants trailed in the water. David tells her to get some wooden closet poles at the Home Depot, and she says, "Oh," and "Perfect!"

"Sam was lucky," Celia says. "She told me whenever she had a question about anything, you'd know what to do."

"Really?" In fact he's been thinking of himself as the Man Who Knows Nothing, the Father Failure, the Hapless Husband.

"Seriously. She called you the Answer Man."

"Well." David searches for something to say. "Sam was never shy about asking for help. I think she did it to socialize."

"Oh, totally." Celia offers a pretty laugh. "She asked to join our study group even though she didn't need anybody's help. She was brilliant. She even talked her way into the Marine Institute's summer program, which is technically for grad students."

"Right," David says, though what he recalls is the disappointment he felt when Sam turned down the summer internship he'd arranged for her at the fulfillment center.

"She was so totally committed," Celia carries on. "She was ready to quit school and work for Coastal Action full time."

"Quit school?" David drops his sandwich. "Wait. What?"

"After the summer institute she was majorly psyched. But I told her no, stay on track. Go off, it's hellish hard to get back on. I know."

“Right,” David says, though what he is thinking is that Sam shared more with Celia than she shared with him. And then, because he senses there’s something else he’s missed, he says, “What do you mean, you went off track?”

“Oh,” Celia says in a light-hearted voice, “I got married when I was eighteen. Divorced in like six months, but it took me years to get back to school.”

“But you’re fine now?” he says, dazed by the idea of Celia sharing a man’s bed.

“Sure.”

“Except for your foot.” David cringes; he can’t believe what he’s said. “Sorry. I couldn’t help noticing.”

Celia lets a long moment tick by before she says, “Car accident. Anyway, you see why I got on Sam’s case about quitting.”

“Definitely.” David imagines Sam out of school, with no degree, living in poverty. And then out of nowhere he pictures Celia with Sam, strolling along a beach, holding hands. Sam never mentioned Celia, but she never mentioned quitting school, either. What else, David wonders, had the daughter with whom he thought he was so close kept from him?

Thursday afternoon a forklift operator drops a pallet of propane tanks on the loading dock, igniting a fire. By the time David helps suppress the flames and reroutes the shipping lines, it’s after six.

He’s an hour late for Celia’s training at the marina, which is just as well because he wants to talk to her in private. Two of the other volunteers have already left and the third, Ben, whose parents own the eighteen-foot Sea Ray they’ll be using, departs not long after David arrives.

The sun is setting behind the marina’s breakwater as Celia waves to Ben and turns to David. Dressed in tight white slacks and a bright blue top, and sporting soft green eye shadow and blush on her pale face, Celia looks altogether different from the freckled co-ed he remembers from the previous Saturday. Before he can mumble more than, “Hey, you look great,” she says, “I wanted to tell you some things. About me.”

“Yes,” David says, “I wanted to ask you something.”

Abruptly, words vault out of him, uncontrollable, because the idea has taken hold in his mind that he is more at fault for Sam’s death than he realized, that his ignorance about her life at school and his foolish assumption that she could take care of herself were terrible, prideful mistakes. “I wanted to ask you,” he says, “what you saw. When Sam was hit.”

Celia picks a life vest off the deck. “I’m not sure I understand.”

“Just—” David feels sweat break out on his forehead. “I want to know if I could have saved her.”

“No.”

He nods dumbly, yet plunges ahead. “But what happened? Really. I read the sheriff’s report, but you were there. I remember seeing you now. You were crying.”

Celia hugs the vest against her and looks out across the marina. “It was . . . an accident. There was a big gang of us milling around. Cars were honking. We were jazzed. And then Sam, I guess she tripped. She stumbled into the road.”

“But—I can’t help thinking—it drives me crazy—she invited us to come, you see? To your protest. Her mother and me. She said, ‘We’re in charge of the planet.’ But Amy and I had plans to visit a winery. But now I can’t help thinking I should’ve been there, I could have saved her. I’m sure of it.”

Celia hunches her shoulders and looks at him bleakly. “The only person who could have saved her was me. I was right beside her when she tripped. I grabbed her arm but she slipped through my fingers. Literally. I had her. But I didn’t hold on.”

David is stunned. None of this was in the sheriff’s report, but he knows from the look on Celia’s face she’s telling the truth. He sits down hard on the starboard cushions as her composure crumbles. He murmurs that it wasn’t her fault and Celia says, “Don’t.” She drops the life vest, fighting back tears. David holds out a hand to her and she sits. As she sobs, he feels his own tears sliding down his cheeks.

“So,” he says after several minutes, when they have both regained their equilibrium. “What was it you wanted to tell me? About you.”

“Never mind.”

“Go ahead. Please.”

Celia's face is such a picture of woe that he puts an arm around her. He hugs her and kisses her forehead. She leans closer and kisses him on the lips. David kisses her back, marveling at the scent of her skin and hair. He pulls her closer, remembering the evening after Sam died, when he went to her room, lifted one of her American Girl dolls from its spot atop her dresser and, weeping, kissed its lips. He recalls the slick plastic taste, the crisp dry odor of artificial hair, and pulls back from this other doll, Celia. She looks at him questioningly, and David lifts an index finger to her lips, proving that she's real.

Celia searches around the boat, fishes a tissue from a maroon day-pack and blows her nose. She checks the time on her phone and tells him her car broke down and she's got to catch a bus home. David offers to drive her.

The address she gives him is in Carpinteria, twenty miles north near Santa Barbara, where she shares a 1960s ranch with two other young women. Half an hour later they exit the freeway and drive through a maze of streets. Each time they turn, the light in the sky changes. On Celia's street it is night.

She invites him in. "My roommates will want to meet you."

In fact, the roommates are busy watching *Grey's Anatomy*, so Celia takes him down the hall to her room. "Ta-da," she says, "Celia's world." David registers the usual furnishings—bed, dresser, desk, lamp—and walls plastered with posters of ocean and coastal scenes.

"I remember sharing a house in Isla Vista," he says. Twenty-plus years ago, and it didn't seem like long at all. "I should get going."

"Why?" Celia says.

She lights a candle on her desk and turns off the bright ceiling light. Into a small Sony boom box, the kind the fulfillment center ships by the thousands, she places a CD of smooth jazz. She lies down on her double bed and pats the covers beside her. "Rest," she says.

Exhausted by months of troubled sleep, David feels his muscles give way, his body sink into the mattress. His thoughts drift with the music, and when next he opens his eyes, he finds his shoes have been removed and Celia snuggling against him, head on his shoulder. He smells a musky perfume and realizes she's naked. Instantly, he's awake.

In fact, she's dressed, though she's traded her slick white pants and long-sleeve top for a silky tank and gauzy harem pants that suggest there is nothing underneath.

"What are you doing?" David says.

"Cuddling."

David is already hard and certain Celia knows it. His mind reels and he tells her he has to go.

Celia raises her head. "No, it's okay. It's good."

"No, it's not good." David turns to her, his lips inches from hers, "I need to go."

"David, I'm not a child." Celia swings one leg over him. "I know what men want."

"Yes. That's kind of you, but—" David reaches down and lifts her leg off his, swings his feet to the floor and sits up. "Maybe you should think about what *you* want."

Celia frowns. "But—wait a minute. After all the vibes I got from you? That kiss?"

"Sorry, I didn't mean. . ." David fumbles with his shoelaces.

"Oh, fuck." She rolls off the bed and stands with her arms wrapped around herself. "I'm sorry, I just thought—I'm *sorry*. Honestly, I'm sorry I'm alive. I'm sorry I'm a fucking defect."

"Don't," David says, and goes out.

"Thanks for the ride," Celia snipes, trailing him to the front door.

David glances back. "For the record, you're no defect. You're about as attractive as a girl can get."

Celia makes a face. "I'll try to be uglier next time."

Saturday morning David sleeps until ten, then startles awake with the realization that the Coastal Action demonstration starts at eleven.

In the kitchen, Amy is slumped at the table, head in her arms. He learns that she drove to the library and discovered it's closed for Cesar Chavez's birthday. "Who the hell is Cesar Chavez?" she asks.

Carefully, David places a hand on her shoulder, frightened because he knows his touch no longer comforts her. Books comfort her. The best he can do is forego the protest and watch her. But then he has a thought.

“Why don’t you try Barnes and Noble? They’re open now.”

Amy shakes her head. “I’m sick of fiction.”

“I’ll drive you.”

She rolls her head back and forth on her arms. “You’ve got that thing. That demonstration.”

“It isn’t important.”

Amy lifts her head. “Are you okay?”

“Sure.”

“Then go.” She drops her head back down. “We’re supposed to go on with our lives, remember?”

David exhales. “We’re okay.” He nods, as if convincing himself. “We’ll be okay.” He places both hands on his wife’s wild, billowing hair and smoothes it down. Kisses the top of her head. When he lets go, her hair springs back up.

At the harbor, Celia and Ben are already there, rigging the pennants to the closet poles. Jason and Kelly, two more members of Coastal Action, arrive as David does. The day is warm and both young women are dressed in short shorts and bikini tops as if headed to a party. All day Friday David wondered what he could say to Celia. Something reassuring. Something flattering. But now he forgets because he has more urgent news to share, and with everyone.

“Listen up,” he says in his professional manager’s voice. When everyone looks his way, he addresses Ben. “Did you check the marine weather conditions?”

Ben glances toward the ocean, where sunlight sparkles over shimmering water. “Yeah. Looks good.”

David shakes his head. “There’s a small craft advisory for this afternoon. Winds increasing to twenty knots with six-to-eight foot swells. This boat isn’t built for that.”

“Sure it is.” Ben sounds insulted. “Besides, your forecast is full of shit. Look at it.”

David looks. The sea is calm and the last of the fog is melting away.

“Wait a minute,” Celia says. “We have to go out.”

“No one has to go anywhere,” David says. “And you for one aren’t.”

“Hey, man,” Ben says, “Who the fuck do you think you are, telling us what we can’t do?”

“I’m not telling you. I’m telling Celia. But I’d advise all of you—”

“Wait a minute.” Celia pinches his arm. “If they go, I go.”

As soon as David tries to speak, the rest of them jump in. Ben shouts that David’s a dumbass, Jason says it’s too late to back out, and Kelly insists on checking the forecast on her phone.

Celia grabs the front of David’s polo shirt. “Why are you making trouble?”

David throws out his arms. “Hey, I was looking forward to this, too. But I’ve sailed enough to know you don’t toy with the ocean. What are you going to do if a wave swamps the boat?”

Celia thumps his chest. “You don’t know that will happen.”

“So what happened to your father?”

“Jesus!” She turns away. “This ruins everything.”

Ben says, “You’re not going to listen to him, are you?”

Celia throws the chart she’s holding across the cockpit. She swears, kicks a coil of rope. David climbs up onto the walkway and retreats to a nearby bench, sitting with his hands on his knees, tapping. He imagines dragging her off the boat, but knows he won’t.

“Hey!” Kelly announces that she’s found the forecast and it does refer to a small craft advisory. Ben yells to fuck the forecast and Jason says a few waves never hurt anybody. They go back and forth with Kelly until she says she isn’t a very good swimmer so she’d better not go.

Celia doesn’t say a word. She watches Kelly step off the boat and, to David’s surprise, follows her. They stand on the walkway and wave as Ben backs the Sea Ray out of its slip.

“Happy?” Celia says, marching over to David’s bench. “Don’t be. I did that for Kelly, not you.” She hurtles down the walkway while David struggles to contain a grin.

Ten minutes later, he spots her familiar limp along Spinnaker and slows his Explorer to offer a ride. Celia tells him to go to hell. “Already there,” he says, and she gives him the finger.

He stretches and shoves the passenger door open. Celia scowls. She tells him she’s hitchhiking to the power plant, to join the team blocking the gate. When David says, “Exactly where I’m heading,” she tells him he’s lying. She curses. She climbs in.

They drive in silence and David wonders what he’s doing. He wants to go home to Amy but he’s afraid he has nothing to offer her.

“Wait,” Celia says, wrenching him out of his reverie. “I don’t want to have to explain why I didn’t go out with Ben. Go somewhere else.”

David slows, turns left into Point Mugu State Park, a rugged expanse of bluffs and grassy hills that tower over a stretch of undeveloped coastline. When he parks, Celia grabs her daypack and is out before he shuts off the motor. Up the Backbone Trail she blazes, the hitch in her gait scarcely noticeable. David follows at a distance, eventually rounding a sandstone outcropping to find her sitting with her back against a windblown oak and frowning at a panoramic vista of mountains and sea.

“You don’t know anything about me,” she says, when David settles nearby. “You think I’m just like Sam. Some privileged college kid.”

“So who are you?”

Celia doesn’t respond. David waits while she inspects her hands, flicks a burr off her shorts, itches her twisted ankle. She reminds him of a woman in a personnel meeting a few weeks back who kept pinching the insides of her arms, pulling them tight against her body, then pinching again.

“I’m nobody,” Celia says at last. “A nobody whose parents didn’t want her. A nobody who lived with an aunt who only did it for the money. A nobody who married an alcoholic bus driver when she was sixteen, a mean drunk who ran her down with his pickup when she told him she was leaving. A nobody who got a GED and then a scholarship this bleeding heart counselor applied for on my behalf. She said people like stories like mine, it shows I’m resilient, which is bullshit. Life is bullshit.”

For an instant, David thinks she’s making it all up. But she’s too angry to be lying.

Celia says, “Sometimes I think the reason I care about fish and seals and the rest of the life in the ocean is because they can’t talk, so they can’t bullshit me. Sometimes I think all the people on Earth should just die.” She picks up a loose rock and heaves it downhill. “I’m not a nice person.”

David hears the bitterness in her voice. “Did you ever tell Sam any of this?”

Celia kicks at the dirt. “She said I didn’t have to be a victim. She said I had a lot to give.”

“And you didn’t believe her?”

Celia doesn’t answer. She catches her bikini strap in her mouth and chews. “Sam was my best friend. I thought you’d be like her. But you’re not like her at all.”

Dismay chafes David and he wants to argue the point. But Celia jumps to her feet. “Time to jet. Don’t worry, I’ll get myself home.”

“Hold on.” Rising, David brushes dirt from his jeans. “Hitchhiking isn’t safe. I can drop you.”

“I’ve been taking care of myself for years.”

“And doing a bang-up job of it.”

“Fuck you, David.”

Celia starts down and after a moment David hustles after her. There is something he wants to tell her, something that will make sense for both of them, but when he tries to formulate the words he can’t. It’s ludicrous. He’s the manager of an entire fulfillment center, he has hundreds of employees, he listens to their problems daily and invariably finds a solution. Why can’t he do the same now?

In the parking lot she is leaning against the fender of his Explorer. When he approaches, she thrusts out her chin and says she’ll take a ride as long as he doesn’t try to talk to her. “Not a word,” she says, “because you do not exist.”

In a robot monotone David murmurs, “Existence is useless.”

Heading north on the freeway to Carpinteria, David drums on the steering wheel. “Don’t forget,” he mumbles to himself, “tonight’s your turn to make dinner.”

It’s true. David and Amy trade off preparing dinner, though often they eat separately.

He exits the freeway at the Whole Foods Market in Oxnard. Celia rustles around in her seat but says nothing. When he parks and goes inside, she follows.

He finds a cart and heads for the deli, thinking of a pre-roasted chicken that would only need warming. While he waits for the clerk, Celia takes the cart and walks away.

He catches up to her in Produce where she has piled red lettuce, cucumber sprouts, garbanzo beans, shredded coconut, and a dozen other vegetables and fruits into the cart. When David settles his chicken into the mix, Celia heads for the checkout stands.

Back on the freeway, he drives three miles and takes the Seaward Avenue exit. He waits for an objection from Celia or at least a question asking what the hell he thinks he's doing. But no complaint is forthcoming, and when he pulls into his driveway and says, "I need to put this food in the fridge before I take you home," Celia is as silent as a shark. When he shuts off the motor and says, "I could use some help," she says, "So right."

A bag in each arm, David hesitates. Warm yellow light gleams from every house on the block except his. He refuses to believe that Amy would actually harm herself, despite the signs. Carissa has talked about acceptance as if it is as simple as opening your heart.

In fact, Amy is reading in the faint daylight still slipping through the living room's picture window, so absorbed that she doesn't look up when he and Celia step inside, until the door bangs shut. Then she blinks, removes her reading glasses and stares. David turns to Celia and sees that she's slipped a t-shirt over her bikini. She looks at his wife warily.

"This is Celia," he says. "Sam's friend. We met at the demonstration."

"Demon—?"

Amy lifts the afghan from her legs and rises with the dazed expression of someone who has just awakened from a dream. She takes a step, then stops to pull her hair back in a knot. As she clips it, her novel slips from the crook of her arm and thuds to the floor. She ignores it.

"Let me take that," Amy says, grasping one of the two bags that Celia is carrying.

"Celia and Sam had classes together," David says, following the women into the kitchen and setting his bags on the center island. "Celia offered to help make dinner."

Amy lifts vegetables from the bag and places them on the granite. "This is quite a haul," she says, and regards Celia with a befuddled look. "It's very kind of you."

"Oh," Celia says, "No problem. Salads are healthy."

"Yes," Amy says, "Salads are always good."

"And chicken. David picked out the chicken."

"He did?"

David feels as if he's standing on foreign territory. Amy and Celia are discussing nutrition, antioxidants and carbohydrates. He retreats to the living room sofa, turns on a basketball game, keeps the volume low. From time to time he catches fragments from the kitchen. A mixing bowl clattering on the counter. The oven door swinging open. Amy saying, "Cecelia. What a pretty name," and Celia murmuring, "Nursing is such a giving profession."

Knives rattle on a cutting board. A faucet hisses. Amy's words are inaudible but Celia's are clear.

"No, no, no. He's sweet."

David settles back on the sofa, flips through channels to a surfing competition. With the volume off, surfers ride up and down the blue ocean waves as if free from gravity. When he lifts his eyes to the clock on the fireplace mantle, half an hour has vanished. Just like that, time has opened and closed.

In the spare bedroom, he slides a window open just enough to let in fresh air.

The warm aroma of chicken suffuses the air and he comes to the kitchen doorway just as Celia is removing the golden brown bird from the oven. They are so close he can see them, clearly now, all the rest of the life in the world.

"Hot! Hot! Hot!" Celia says, as Amy hovers behind her, left hand with an oven mitt at the ready, right hand floating in the air, inches above the young girl's shoulder.