

Before California Fell into the Sea

by Ian Wolff

After living together for more than year, I still hadn't met my girlfriend's parents. I met her in grad school in a seminar on Milton. We were both in our second year of the MFA program at UC Arizona, in Tucson. By our last semester we were living together. Now, a year after we graduated we were still in Tucson. I suppose the town's easygoing attitude and slow pace had lulled us into complacency. Time just slipped away and before we knew it a full year had gone by. I had been feeling anxious and felt like Leda was watching me, waiting for me to make a move of some kind. Then, out of the blue, one morning over coffee Leda and I decided to drive out to California to see her folks.

"It's been too long since I've visited my parents," she said, sipping from her mug and watching me over the rim, her right brow arching.

I studied her for a second, wondering if this was some kind of a test. "I'd love to meet them," I said lamely. As soon as I said it I felt like I should have had a better answer, so I followed up. "Let's make the trip."

"Fly or drive?" she said.

"Drive," I said. Driving was the first thing that came to mind. Leda agreed. Maybe we thought driving would be relaxing, or maybe we shared the romantic illusion that something would present itself to us on the lonely stretch of desert highway between Tucson and Reno, something that might point the way to our next move, or maybe it was just that we both hated flying. Either way, the drive proved uneventful, even tedious. And our old Rabbit with no air conditioning baked on the hot asphalt under the unforgiving desert sun.

We finally pulled the car into the gravel parking lot at her folks' place early in the morning well before sunrise. I shut off the lights and sat there, letting the motion of the road dissipate from my bones. The windows were down and the crickets were loud. Oak trees surrounded us. In the dark, I could see the outlines of several of the buildings on the property. On the drive out, Leda had told me about the old turkey farm where her parents have lived since the 1970s, since before most of the vineyards were planted that now push up against Old Redwood Highway and line the road all the way to the turn-off for their property. Over the years her stepfather, a tenured English professor at the local junior college, converted, to varying degrees of livability, the old turkey barns or sheds that came with the property.

"Let's sleep under the stars," said Leda as we sat there, letting the stillness rejuvenate us. Her hair caught the moonlight. When they were kids and the weather was nice, she and her sisters would sleep outside under a pile of blankets. The evening was warm but it was too early in the season for mosquitoes. We pulled out some bedding from the back of our car and spread it on the grass halfway between the parking lot and the main house. We were both exhausted but we had feverish, drowsy sex out there under the stars. Half asleep, our bodies knew what to do. I had the strange sensation that I was lifting out of my body, as if the sky above us had some kind of gravitational pull or force. The sensation was disorienting and for a split second, looking through the darkness at Leda's face (there was only faint light from the crescent moon) I thought I saw my own face looking up at me.

"I want you to come in my mouth," she said as she felt me nearing. By then I had my mouth down on her tits. I wasn't sure I heard right because she had her hands over my ears. But then I was coming and she was too and the next thing I knew I was waking up and it was still dark. The moon had set. There was a rustling noise in the branches of the oak tree near where we had set up our bedding. At first I felt a kind of panic or dread. The feeling swelled in my chest as if some wild animal or criminal were about to rush out from

the shadows. I took a deep breath and told myself to relax, there had to be some kind of an explanation. Then I heard a caw and I told myself: "It's a crow in the tree." That put my mind at rest and I slipped back into sleep.

The sun woke me in the morning. I tried to block out the light by rolling over and burying my face in Leda's hair. I slept a little longer until I heard some activity at what I assumed was the main house. I figured it must be Leda's mom pattering around the deck setting out plates on a big table. She was far enough away that I didn't feel too awkward being naked under the blankets. But I realized we were practically sleeping on the doorstep of the other turkey sheds. In the night they had seemed distant or vague shadows. But in the light of the morning I felt as if we were in a spotlight. The rest of the family would soon be rising and making their way to the main house and our bed was right in their path. I looked at Leda. She was sleeping peacefully. Last night felt like a dream. I felt my cock for any signs that we had actually had sex before we fell asleep. There weren't any. And the crow in the tree? Was that part of the dream too? I kissed Leda deeply on the mouth. She didn't wake, but her hand went down to my penis.

"Your mom can see us," I said.

Leda opened her eyes and for a moment didn't seem to see me, or seemed to see me from a great distance as she slowly rose from sleep. Leda was a profound sleeper. Her eyes finally locked on mine and she smiled.

"Good morning," she said.

We put on our clothes under the blankets. I was ready for some coffee and Leda was excited to see her family. She hadn't been home more than once or twice since I first met her. I was nervous, slightly unmoored by the unfamiliar surroundings and the impending dose of family.

We folded up our bedding and put it back in the car then made our way to the main house. Away from the shade of the oak tree the sun was already warm and the dew on the grass was drying. There was a smell in the air I had never encountered. It was a combination

of moisture and dryness, of dust and dew. And the surroundings were alien, like something I'd seen in a movie once. Having arrived at night, with nothing visible save the gnarly branches of the trees along the road that jumped out under the headlights of our car, I felt oddly disconnected from the outside world. Leda's mom waited at the top of the stairs. She embraced Leda then turned to me. She was short and stocky with close-cropped dark hair salted by a faint trace of gray. Her movements were firm and authoritative in a concerted, motherly way.

"Let me look at you," she said. "So handsome." I tried not to blush. She opened her arms and welcomed me into her embrace. Soon the others had spilled out from their turkey sheds. Leda's two sisters each lived in one. The oldest lived in the larger one with her lover and young daughter from another man. Jasmine, the youngest of the sisters, had been getting into trouble after dropping out of college and Leda's mom had brought her back into the family fold to try to straighten her out. She was sullen, tattooed and inexpressibly beautiful. Everyone gathered around for introductions but all I could think about was the big pot of black coffee on the table surrounded by piles of pancakes and fresh fruit. Collin, Leda's stepdad soon joined us. He was a towering figure. Tall and round at the same time. He wore a denim shirt open to the third button, loose fitting up top but stretched tight over his prominent belly. He brought the Sunday paper with him. The family, Leda's mom explained to me, always read the paper cover to cover over Sunday breakfast. Collin took my hand and shook it, staring down at me from under the bushy brows of an old scholar. I could tell he was a man who didn't like to be crowded or unnecessarily diverted from his daily routine. Already I could sense his impatience with all the activity.

"How was the drive?" he asked gruffly. He hardly waited for an answer before he took his place at the table. Soon we were all seated and plates were being passed around. The conversation turned to Leda's recent prize for her chapbook, then briefly to politics, the upcoming presidential election, offshore drilling. The day was quickly heating up. Two large umbrellas sheltered us from

the direct sun. Soon the crickets were going and a dusty, hay-like smell rose from the warmed grass in the field surrounding the house. The newspaper was passed around, sections handed off. There were a variety of exclamations, usually of frustration or disgust. Quotes were read. Idiocy pointed out, usually around something a conservative Congressman had said, or a Supreme Court ruling.

"Here you go," said Leda's mother. "Look at this." She held up a map of California that was covered in red circles with different diameters and shading. It was a map of all the potential epicenters for the next big earthquake. The diameter and darkness of the circles represented the gravity of the epicenter. The article covered the culmination of a study that involved drilling deep into the San Andreas fault at a range of sites along its length. The study's findings were alarming and called for an immediate infusion of funds to prepare for a virtually guaranteed disaster within the next several years.

"They say this every year," said Collin. "They want to convince us that California's going to fall into the fucking ocean." A bit of white spittle had collected at the corner of his mouth. He was agitated. From what little I had to go on, I was already getting an idea of what this man was all about. He was one of those guys who could take a stance on something even if there was no point in arguing about it. Who argues about whether California will fall into the ocean or not? That's like arguing whether or not God exists. You can't really prove it until it's too late. If you were able to prove that God exists, wouldn't that be a situation so beyond our comprehension that we wouldn't even be able to experience the knowledge? And if California did indeed fall into the ocean, there would only be that brief moment of recognition as the tectonic rupture progresses up the fault sending out elastic rebound waves and straining the rock mass on which we've built our houses and schools, rock grinding on rock, fissures opening up, sidewalks caving in as the teetering promontory to which we cling collapses beneath the waves. Any recognition of our fate becomes meaningless at that point. I

promised myself I wouldn't cross him. There is nothing worse than getting into an argument with a bitter old man in front of your girlfriend.

So I speared a wedge of pineapple and savored its sweet, juicy meat. The guava was very good too. Everything seemed fresher in California. Leda's mom had put out a very nice spread. Mary, Leda's niece, climbed onto my lap when she tired of running circles around the table shouting, "Tricks, kicks, pickup the Goddamned sticks!" She looked up at me after she had situated herself comfortably and asked, "Are you and Leda going to have babies?" This got laughs from around the table. I wasn't quite sure why we were laughing. But Mary looked up at me very seriously, as if daring me to laugh at her.

"Well, Mary," I said. "Maybe someday. Right now we both have a lot of work to do first."

"What? Writing? That's not work," she said with all the wisdom of a five year old. She jumped off my lap and went running down the stairs and out into the meadow behind the house. Her mother called after her not to go too far. I looked at Leda. She was smiling at me.

After awhile the conversation petered out. The newspaper had been picked apart. Most of the food was gone. Leda started to clean up and took the dishes inside. Everyone was dispersing so I followed her inside. The house was a relic of 70's do-it-yourself esthetic: misshapen windows cobbled together from salvaged glass, doors of thick exotic wood, exposed beams, chunky hand-built bookshelves towering with ancient tomes, wide skylights that seemed like they would let in too much sun on hot days and leak in the rain but give impressive twinkling views of the stars at night. In the kitchen a hulking stove huddled in the corner and still radiated heat from the morning baking. I helped Leda at the deep porcelain sink.

"After we finish the dishes I'll take you on a little hike. There's a beautiful trail in back of the property."

The trail wound through oak trees and climbed up a hill. The sun was high and hot whenever we came out from the cover of the trees.

"We used to come up here all the time," Leda said. "Sometimes we'd race up to the top of the hill."

"Let's not race," I said because I was terribly out of shape and already the climb was winding me.

"In fact," I said, "why don't we take a rest." We stopped under a tree.

"OK old man," Leda said. She came to me and kissed me. Then she was unbuttoning my pants and kneeling down. I was immediately hard. She had me in her mouth. Then she looked up at me and took her mouth off of my cock. "I want you to FUCKING come in my mouth." This was all very strange. Leda was by no means a prude, but she wasn't one to talk dirty, at least in such pat pornographic terms. I have to admit I found it a huge turn-on but I couldn't get over the sense that there was some kind of disconnect, as if it wasn't really Leda who was telling me to come in her mouth. It occurred to me that since we left Tucson Leda had seemed miles away, even in the close confines of the car. It was as if we weren't meant to exist together outside of Tucson, and now that we had breached our domain, the laws of our universe had changed irrevocably.

"Leda," I said. "Is everything OK?" She ignored me, having already taken me back into her mouth. I heard a crow caw. At first it was distant but soon I heard the fluttering of wings and the bird settled on one of the higher branches of the tree. It let out a few more caws and then just watched us with its head cocked to one side.

"Leda," I said.

"Come on," she said. When she said that, I found I couldn't stop. So I came in her mouth and on her face.

"Oh," she said. "That's hot."

I took off my shirt and then my tank top. I used that to wipe her face. Then I kissed her, not afraid to taste myself there. Leda jumped up. "Race you to the top," she said and took off before I could object. I wasn't feeling like racing anywhere. In fact I was suddenly overcome by an overwhelming urge to sleep. I watched Leda bound

up the trail. She was all vitality and energy, all legs and arms, all rush and surge, while I felt disembodied, tired. I felt like there was no way that I could muster the energy to chase her up the hill. I sat down under the tree and leaned against its trunk. The bark was rough against my skin. But that didn't keep me from falling fast asleep.

The crow woke me up. Everything was bathed in an orange glow. The sun was setting. I couldn't figure out how the sun could already be setting. At first I thought I was alone, then I saw Leda curled up on the grass next to me with my shirt cushioning her face. She was asleep. I put my hand on her back and she rolled against me then opened her eyes.

"What time is it?"

"The sun is setting," I said.

"Wow, I really conked out."

"Me too," I said.

I stood up and reached my hand out to help her up. She stood and moved into my arms. We stayed like that, my arms around her, her head on my shoulder, while the sun went down behind the coastal range across the valley. This was one of those moments that is like seeing yourself in a picture. The beauty of the surroundings—the golden grass covered hillside studded with knotty, old oak trees, the light suffusing everything with an almost palpable golden hue, high overhead a circling hawk, the air just below body temperature, the valley of Santa Rosa spreading out below us in a vast patchwork expanse of roads and houses while we hovered above it all—was unlike anything I had ever seen before. I had heard about the beauty of California, of course. And in Tucson I'd had no shortage of breathtaking sunsets from the top of Wasson Peak where you could look down over the vast stretch of land all the way to White Sands. And I was intoxicated by the desert after a thunderstorm, by the scent of the desert plants after a rain, and the light reflecting off the retreating clouds, and I was exhilarated by the heat and glare of such a brutal climate. But with this beauty was different, as if it was so perfect it denied your participation. This was a beauty that stood

aloof, deigning to let you appreciate it yet moving just out of reach whenever you thought you might possess it.

Back at the house, Leda's mother and sisters were working on dinner.

"There's the love birds," Leda's mother exclaimed when we came into the kitchen. She winked at us and motioned to an open bottle of wine. I poured us two glasses and Leda and I toasted.

"I took Ian up the hill trail."

"Isn't it gorgeous," Leda's mom said, grinning at me.

"It is," I said. "This is really amazing country."

Leda's sisters both laughed. I didn't quite understand what they were laughing at, but I didn't let it bother me. I took a long drink of my wine. It was a cabernet from a local vineyard. I was tempted to drink it down in one long gulp, but I restrained myself.

"Can I help with anything?" I asked, hoping that there might be something to do so that I wouldn't feel obligated to come up with any stimulating conversation or wonder what exactly it was that the women were laughing at.

All three of them said "No!" at once. So I sat at a little table between the kitchen and the dining room. Les, Leda's sister's partner came in with Mary in tow. I hadn't talked much with him up to this point. He grabbed a beer and flopped down at the table opposite me. Mary went to her mom and hugged her leg before running off into the living room for a romp with Mr. Bloom, their chubby and convivial Rottweiler.

"First visit to California?" Les asked. At breakfast, Les had been quiet at the end of the table. Now he had the brusqueness of the second in command. He lived under the shadow of Collin and his question was no more than a power brokerage, an assertion of his rank. The question stemmed not so much from interest as from geopolitical wrangling. I was happy to let him know that I wasn't here to usurp anyone. I conveyed this through body language, a slight stoop of the shoulders, an indirect gaze, a soft, acquiescing

voice. It's amazing how much power you have over the power hungry by giving them the illusion of your servitude.

"Yes," I said, eagerly. "It's incredibly beautiful."

He took a drink of his beer and seemed to warm a bit. "Gina tells me you just finished at graduate school in Tucson. You grew up in New York, I hear. I've never been out east. I'm sure it's got its points, too."

I nodded at him and took a sip of my wine. Leda looked at me and smiled. I looked back at Les. "Sure it does. You just don't get a Fall like you do on the east coast." He didn't seem to have any idea what I was talking about. "All the leaves," I said, "explode in color at the same time. People come from all over to see it." Les took another drink of his beer. He looked as if he was coming to the conclusion that there wouldn't be very much he and I could talk about, which didn't bother me. I was happy sipping my wine and watching the three women, watching the similar shape of their shoulders, the way they would pass things to each other without speaking, the pleasure they got from being in the same room together.

Leda brought a cutting board to the table. "Here," she said, "cut these peppers." I was thankful for the little chore so that I could turn my attention from Les without being rude. Usually I'm pretty good with the small talk, but once in awhile you run into a wall. Les was just such a wall, a lexical non-entity. He just looked at me, not completely judging, but certainly not accommodating either. I tried to imagine him with Leda's sister who was a bright woman, successful in her career at Hewlett Packard, independent, happy. I couldn't picture it.

Les finally got up from the table and went into the living room. I finished with the peppers and brought them to Leda who dropped them into a pan with hot olive oil and garlic. The wine had gone to my head and I was feeling quite good. It'd been awhile since I drank really good wine. In Tucson we stick to the inexpensive stuff, anything that can be served cold: cheap white wine in a box, gin and tonics, beer. I like to drink and I've got no bones about it. So I poured myself another glass. Soon Collin padded into the kitchen

like an old lion to survey the work. He looked into some pots, took a gulp off his Scotch on the rocks and patted his wife on the ass. "Smells good," he said.

A few glasses of wine later and I was seated at the table. There were lamb chops and roasted vegetables, cauliflower au gratin, fresh greens, sautéed chard. More wine and a zabaglione for desert. Leda's mom loved to cook. Leda wasn't half bad herself. She had picked up on the southwest flavors since living in Tucson. She made fry bread and chili. Salsas and tacos. Fresh tortillas. The works. I could see where she got it.

Inevitably talk turned to the war in Iran.

"And it's like its not even happening," Collin was saying. He reached for his glass of wine then moved his hand to his glass of Scotch. After he took a drink he went on. His cheeks were red and his eyes bloodshot: "We sit here and gripe, but that doesn't change anything. We can talk and talk about how bad it is, this and that, empire, blah fucking blah. But here we are eating our dinner, drinking our drinks."

I found myself suddenly furious. Not about the war, though. I had already come to terms with the fact that I was a spineless citizen who was much more interested in my little texts and my tepid fictions than I was with the state of the world. Oh sure, I checked the New York Times website every morning before I worked on my writing. But it was more of a convenient procrastination than anything of substance. I was able to feel like I was doing my duty as a concerned citizen by informing myself, while in actuality I was really just dreading sitting down in front of the typer and facing the lines that had yet to be written. But this old man at the head of the table, he got under my skin. Probably because I saw something of myself in him which I disliked seeing. If anything, I wanted to do whatever was in my power to avoid winding up like him: tenured, angry, frustrated, disenfranchised from my dreams, dreams forgotten, and likely long ago; drinking in frustration, that angry knot which used to unwind after the first drink now stubborn to the

very end, to the bottom of the bottle judging by his trajectory, by his rising temper.

"What would you suggest?" I asked, feeling best of the wine.

"What would I suggest," he said putting his drink down carefully, as if he was fully registering the tone of my voice. "What would I suggest?" he said louder this time, his hands clenching the end of the table. Everyone was quiet. Leda's mom was the first to intervene.

"Collin," was all she said as if she knew that what had been set in motion couldn't be stopped. She looked at me and, in that moment, couldn't conceal her frustration, as if to say, "Did you have to? Can't you just let the old man spout?" Collin's face had ballooned up. I was worried that he might have a stroke or heart attack. I was also worried about violence. He seemed as if he could turn the table over with one hand. He was a big, hulking man and despite his age I suddenly found myself worried for my own safety. I couldn't even look at Leda. I knew she'd be furious with me for making conflict where none was necessary. But then Collin let out a violent exhalation of air and guffawed.

"HA HA HA—What would I suggest. HA HA HA—That's rich!" He pounded the table. Plates clattered and silverware jangled. The wine in my glass sloshed around like there was an earthquake. "What would I suggest? A fine question my boy. How about a toast to our wise leaders, and I quote: 'Wondrously the harness bell dissolves in ringing; the air rumbles, shattered to pieces, and turns to wind; everything on earth flies by, and, looking askance, other nations and states step aside to make way.' How about a toast to that." He raised his glass—this time he went for the wine. "Here's to peace. May Mary see it in her lifetime."

The next morning I woke up disoriented, unsure where I was, with a wicked hangover. I had stayed up with Collin working on the bottle of Scotch. He had warmed up to me and wanted to know about my work, how I had found the MFA program, was it rigorous enough, was there enough emphasis on literature itself or was it all workshops and therapy. I didn't have much positive to say. The

program was mostly workshop and therapy. The volume of pages of writing about a relative dying of cancer, some form of unnamable dread, ineffable heartbreak, all told in a restrained drone that seemed to radiate from the pages like decaying isotopes, or “isotropes”, if you will, was a perennial buzz-kill, and I had to admit that the amount of inspired writing coming out of the workshop could be measured in a tablespoon, for which I was as much to blame as anyone.

My head hurt but Leda was soft and warm next to me, so I wasn't really concerned by the pain—in fact it only emphasized her beauty, and my longing to caress her skin, which I did.

After we made love, we dressed and went to the kitchen. It was still early but everyone was already gathered there: the two sisters, Mary, Les and Collin. They all had mugs of coffee—except Mary who sipped her hot chocolate as if she were an adult with her coffee—which they had just filled at the coffee machine. There was enough left for two more cups. Leda and I were going to take a drive to the coast. She wanted us to go alone even though her sisters wanted to join us. She was taking me to the beach she used to go to when she and her friends ditched classes in high school. They would meet in the parking lot of school and drive out in their friend's VW van with a keg of beer in the back. She had lost touch with this friend, but from her stories it seemed like he had played a substantial role in her high school years. I think she had been in love with him, but that didn't matter now—at least that's what I told myself as we pulled off highway 101 onto a country road that wound up through the coastal range that separated Santa Rosa from the ocean. The road was narrow and windy. It threaded through stands of eucalyptus and cypress trees. Herds of cattle and sheep grazed in the yellow fields on either side of us. We climbed gently at first, then steeply. We passed the Bodega, where some scenes in *The Birds* was filmed. We continued to climb and when we reached the crest of the range the ocean appeared below us. It glistened in the sun. The blue of the water was unbelievable and from our vantage it seemed like a mirage until we dropped down to Highway 1 where the ocean

became immediate in its vastness and the abandon with which it hurled against the abruptness of the cliffs. I had never seen ocean like that before. My parents had talked about taking my brother and me up the Maine coast but we never made the trip. So I only knew the tame Atlantic off the coast of Long Island and the Jersey shore (my mom's Aunt, who she wasn't very fond of, had a summer house there. We visited once or twice). And while I had seen pictures of many of the oceans that span the earth none of those pictures had prepared me for this, for the violent ocean swirling and clashing around and against the huge hulking rocks that, despite their size, seemed desperate and alone in the face of the ocean's unceasing assault.

Leda pointed to a pullout and I pulled the car over. We walked down a narrow trail. The trail seemed perilous, like if you lost your footing you'd tumble headlong down to the beach a hundred feet below.

When we reached the beach, Leda took my hand. The sun was high and there was a mild, warm offshore breeze. I tried to imagine her in high school, driving in someone's car with a group of friends, on the beach, drinking beer from a keg. I tried to imagine the boys that she had been with, but I couldn't picture who it would be that would have caught her fancy then. Trying to imagine it, I realized I didn't really know Leda at all. In that moment I felt very alone. As if sensing that, she gripped my hand tighter and pulled me to her. We kissed there in the sand for a minute.

"This is the longest stretch of beach in the area, it's almost three miles down to that point," she said, pointing to a distant mass of rock jutting out into the ocean. She tugged at my hand and we started to walk along the strip of beach where the waves spent themselves. Seaweed dried in the sun. Little birds with long skinny legs chased the water as it came and went, some unfamiliar breed of bird circled in flocks on the updrafts along the high cliffs that lined the beach. It suddenly seemed to me as we walked hand in hand that if anywhere were going to fall into the ocean it would be this stretch of beach. It seemed, in fact, as if it had already fallen into the ocean,

and that what we saw before us now was the aftermath. I felt a faint but anxious tightness in my chest. Leda, having grown up in California, had no fear of earthquakes. The more I thought about it though, given the tectonic uncertainty pointed out in the article in the Sunday newspaper, strolling along a beach hemmed in by cliffs didn't seem like the best idea. I tried to take courage from Leda's lack of concern. She was gazing out over the waves to where the sun was hitting a bank of clouds offshore and streaming down in vast pillars of light like Doré's engraving of the *Fall of Lucifer in Paradise Lost*, minus Lucifer, of course. It seemed so long ago now that Leda and I had met in the Milton seminar. But I remembered walking into the classroom and seeing her. She is certainly pretty but when she said later that day that the loss of Paradise can be seen as representing the birth of textuality, a move away from the unitary into the fragmented world of difference and repetition, I knew I was hooked. We moved in together a few months later. And now here we were walking along a stretch of coast. A line from *Ulysses* came to mind: "A catalectic tetrameter of iambs marching. No, agallop: *deline the mare*". Could these cliffs along this shore fall into the *mare*? They could, according to the findings of an elite group of seismologists. But our walk wasn't cut short by any rumblings. Paleoseismology was on our side today. We stayed mostly quiet on the walk. Someone's dog ran at us. It jumped up on Leda, and got its paws all over her. She laughed with delight. The little terrier type dog was eager for us to throw a piece of driftwood that it had dropped at our feet. Another couple walking in the opposite direction called to their dog from a distance. It turned obediently and raced back to them. When we passed each other they nodded at us and apologized about their dog. I could hear their wet footsteps in the sand disappear behind us.

That night was our last night at the ranch. It was much the same as the night before. Collin and Les sat around in the living room while Mary entertained them by spinning in circles until she fell down from dizziness, then getting up and doing it all over again, indefatigably. I stayed in the kitchen and sat at the table with

Jasmine trying not to stare at her pierced lip and the curves under her tight shirt. Talk meandered easily. There was talk about Mary's talent with finger-paints, Jasmine's acting class at the community college, my own ongoing attempts at the short story, which, much to my chagrin, Leda's mom asked me about. I changed the topic by recommending that the family should come visit us in Tucson before I realized that part of this trip was to figure out how to break the spell of Tucson, where we both had agreed we would never reach our full potential as writers, and once broken, where to go. But now, with that invitation, it seemed like Tucson was somehow calling me back to it. I wondered if Leda felt the same way. She walked up behind me and put her hands on my shoulders. It was a loving touch and a consoling one as well, as if she were warning me in advance to prepare for some type of heartbreak, or maybe that was just my imagination.

"It's not as beautiful as out here," I said, "but the high desert has a beauty all its own."

"Sure," said Jasmine, "like those paintings by Georgia O'Keefe."

Leda and I read about the quake in the morning paper a few days after we got back to Tucson. She called her mom right away. The quake hit while everyone back at the ranch was still asleep. Luckily a turkey shed is flexible. The old wood absorbed the shockwave and nobody was injured. Many of the brick buildings in downtown Santa Rosa didn't fare so well.

I did a little of my own research. A rupture along the Rodger's Creek fault triggered the quake. Turns out a government study found it much more likely to rupture in the next 30 years than the San Andreas fault, but it hadn't received nearly the same level of attention. In the world of tectonics the San Andreas was the star. There had been one voice of warning though: a professor Martinez at Sonoma State University had been saying for years that the algorithms used in the earthquake prediction software failed to recognize the amplificatory nature of the Neogene basin under the Santa Rosa Plain. What's more, the instability of the sedimentary

and volcanic fill, over 2.5 kilometers thick in some spots, only added to the likelihood of strike-slip rupture. Given the magnitude of the quake, it seemed a miracle, according to the Press Democrat, the Santa Rosa newspaper, that the quake was so localized, was barely felt in San Francisco, and, more importantly, that only two lives were lost: The night before the quake, a couple had driven to Goat Rock, a popular make-out spot and the same jutting rocks that marked the end of the beach Leda had pointed out on our walk. They might have fallen asleep in the car, lulled to their dreams by the gently falling rain. But the same rain had soaked the spongy sandstone under their car so that when the quake hit it caused massive soil liquefaction, which basically means that the vibrations from the quake, combined with heavy saturation, turned the solid state of the soil into a liquid state. And the sleeping lovers, along with over five hundred yards of coastline, plunged into the ocean.

