

The Spirit Upwelling

by Linda Boroff

"I was born there," Robert answers. "Nobody ever *moves* there." We are racing through the Kettleman Hills, late for his mother's birthday dinner, heading for trouble at eighty miles per hour. I clench my teeth as the parched, palomino-banked curves yank the Camaro around and through them by centrifugal force, hot asphalt uncoiling before us like a whip. Below, the earth is platted into odd geometrical shapes: scalene triangles and parallelograms of umber, dun and ochre. I see no green whatsoever.

"What is it they grow out here again?"

"Cotton, wheat, alfalfa."

"You know, that's the first thing you've said about this place that wasn't negative."

"Rattlesnakes." But he grins. The Valley has been an easy place for Robert to leave, but not to stay away from. Scanning the landscape, the word empty keeps coming to mind, but I was taught that empty refers only to the imagination of the observer, never the reality.

The sky is relentlessly blue, faded at the eastern horizon. A jet swoops suddenly into view, flying low, reflecting the sun like a needle in the eye. Robert tips his head left. "Lemoore Naval Air Station. Back in high school, I used to work there summers, tending the runways. Temperature out on the blacktop'd hit about one-fifty."

An English major drunk on Keats and Fitzgerald, I am trying to think of this place as a sort of boondocks Brigadoon, but it seems more hellish by the minute. "It has its own harsh beauty," I try.

Robert looks at me quickly. "And you've read a lot of books." A moment later, he says, "In spring, these hills turn into a carpet of flowers overnight. Golden poppies and blue lupine. You wouldn't believe it." I lean my head against him. "Gone as fast as they came."

His shoulder is hard and warm beneath my cheek. And I am not particularly worried about meeting his family either. I know by now that I am not the type of girl that parents approve of. I don't

even take it personally anymore. "Slinky," one mother had called me, as if that were something bad. Anyway, what Robert and I have, no parent can get between. Not yet.

Alton was built from the ground up by Standard Oil, Robert is saying, back when the San Joaquin Valley was rumored to float on a sea of crude. When the truth became known, the company pulled out, leaving behind a showcase high school that the town never grew into and a scattering of oil pumps that go on living in death.

The broad-beaked, seesawing contraptions remind me at first of toy birds. But the English Major soon conjures each one hosting a luckless spirit--an alcoholic perhaps--condemned to suck away at dry earth until some sin has been expiated, as in Hans Christian Anderson's "The Girl Who Stepped on a Loaf." One day, the purified souls would fly free at last, soaring up out of the pumps as a flock of white doves to disappear into that endless sky.

You don't really enter Alton; you simply notice the ramshackle farms getting closer together. Piles of sunbleached lumber and crusted paint cans lie about in patchy, weedy yards, as if people had once hoped to renew their lives, but gave up. I see a lot of green corrugated fiberglass awnings and faded flamingos and overgrown succulents in cracked tubs. One street boasts a thin veneer of wealth--"Beverly Hills" Robert calls it with a snort. But most homes have that universal American look of poverty with their weathered siding and splintery porches, a crate stuck under the front door as a step. Suddenly, I ache for Robert: Beneath his lanky, cynical swagger, preppy wardrobe, spotless car and neat pile of law school applications, this sad truth persists.

And I bite back a confession that my own family is probably poorer than half the people in these shacks, only less honest about it, shoring up a middle-class facade with overextended credit cards and loans from reluctant relatives. When I met Robert on a blind date, I had finessed my life story with carefully crafted half-truths: My father's chronic unemployment and frequent absences became an executive career path; my mother's clerkship in a toy store an escape from housewifely boredom. Since I started college, no

relationship has ever lasted long enough to reach a day of reckoning.

We grind slowly down the main street to minimize the dust cloud. "There's Sam n' Eileen Crouch." Robert waves to an elderly couple who stop gardening to watch us pass, heads on a slow swivel, eyes narrow, mouths agape. "Sam taught history out at the high school, hell of a nice guy. It's probably you they're gawkin' at, nothing personal."

"Alton High, Home of the Rattlers," I read, farther on. Spotless Doric columns are crowned by a stone frieze of warriors and naiads bracketing the etched phrase "A posse ad esse."

"It means 'From the possible to the actual.'" He grins at my polite, analytical frown. "Don't think about it too much."

It's past six when we pull up to a one-story bungalow with white siding and green shutters that match the astroturf lawn. We get out and stretch wearily, nerves vibrating. The heat is still fierce but starting to yield, the relieved earth giving off a mulchy aroma. The evening serenade of frogs, crickets and swamp coolers is already underway. A wrought-iron banister, leaning askew, conducts us up three steps to a wooden door bearing a lot of casual scuff marks and three serious penetrating wounds.

"C'mon in." But Robert opens the door only enough for him to poke his head through and glance around. After a moment he throws it wide and pulls me after him.

Kitchen and living room share a single space. A table midway between them is set with white cloth, candles and a mob of silverware. I note fake wood paneling and a giant TV; a brass-chained swag lamp with tasseled mustard shade hovers low over a gray sectional couch that seems to be composed entirely of stained, swollen cushions. The carpet was once bright orange. Two women at the stove turn and squeal with delight.

"Bobby! You made it after all!" The older of the women takes a quick puff from her cigarette, parks it on the edge of the sink, and runs in high heels, leaking smoke, to grab him. Her kiss leaves a blot of hot pink lipstick on his flushed cheek. "I swear, you get better

lookin' every time I see you!" She gives Robert a searching glance.
"Where the hell you been?"

"Ran late. Auntie Verna, this is Isobel Wittman. Isobel, my favorite naughty aunt."

"Oh get out, you big flirt." Auntie Verna reaches across Robert to hug me. I get a whiff of hard liquor, tobacco and perfume before she holds me away for a better look. Her sharp blue eyes scan me so quickly that I can almost feel the wind of their passing.

"Ain't she pretty, and will you look at all that hair, we used to call it raven's wing back in my day." She laughs, her teeth straight but stained and missing molars. Porous blonde hair falls out of a twist barely restrained by two plastic tortoiseshell daggers. Robert's mother steps up behind Verna, and I realize instantly where Robert got his looks.

"Isobel, my mom, Lillian."

"Just call me Lili." She pronounces it Lee-Lee. Her face was once radiantly beautiful, but the fragile skin has been no match for the Central Valley sun. The sea-mist eyes, wide and large, are Robert's, his symmetrical features translated into the feminine, or rather hers into him. Wavy hair, dyed honey blonde, hangs to her collarbone, tendrils curling around her damp face. She is thin beneath a translucent, full-skirted dress that matches her eyes. Something about her makes you want to console her.

"Well, I'm glad he's late," Lili says to Verna. And to me, "you kids missed the worst of the heat. Lord, we've had a scorcher." She rubs the back of her hand across her forehead. "Why, I couldn't bring myself to even start dinner till an hour ago."

"What's wrong with the air conditioner?"

"Ask your father." Verna and Robert exchange another look.

"Why are you cooking on your birthday anyway, mom?"

"I wanted to cook, I just don't know why Paul set the time so early."

"Cause it's when the hell people get hungry," comes a voice from the bedroom. Everybody freezes, only their eyes moving from one to the other.

"He's okay once he eats," Verna whispers to me and winks.

"So's Godzilla," says Robert.

"Well I'm pleased to meet you at last, Isobel" Lili says. "Now let me get you a little something to take the dust out of your mouth."

"And I'll just help Bobby bring in your things." Verna takes Robert firmly by the arm, but he stands planted.

"What the hell's his problem?"

"Now, don't start up."

"He's the one starting up."

"Well, he gets that way when he's hungry, you oughta know by now." Verna smiles helplessly at me, and I nod in commiseration, as if I too have been down this road countless times. "He was expectin' you at two."

"And I told the sonofabitch I couldn't make it here by two."

"It's goddamn disrespectful of your mom, is what it is. And they been at that bottle all day, and whose fault is that?" A stubby, graying man emerges from the bedroom in a blue striped seersucker bathrobe hanging half open to reveal a hairy, concave chest above an ample belly. His eyebrows are thick black bolts drawn together by his scowl. His beard is about three days old.

"Get some clothes on," Robert says without looking. In the silence, Lili grabs my hand and leads me into the kitchen and points at a cardboard storage box on the counter.

"I got out my great-great grandma's bone china in honor of the occasion," she whispers. "I never did know what they meant by 'bone', do you?" I shake my head, and she crinkles up her nose and laughs.

"Well?" Says Paul to the room at large. "Is somebody gonna introduce me?"

"I will as soon as you get dressed," Robert says, staring straight ahead.

"Aahhhh, t's been hotter n' a goddamn furnace all day," Paul mutters and turns back into his room. It takes him a couple of tries to pull the swollen door shut behind him.

"Happy birthday, Mom." Robert grabs Lili around the waist and swings her squealing in a circle.

"My turn, my turn!" Verna capers like a little girl, loses her balance and grabs the counter. Lili reaches into the box and takes out an eggshell-thin teacup and pours about three fingers of bourbon into it from a half gallon bottle.

"Happy birthday to me," she sings, handing me the teacup and sipping from her own.

"Take it easy, mom," Robert says. Lili holds her cup to the kitchen window, whose light illuminates a silver-wigged swain strumming his lyre to a lady reclining in a garden, a smitten spaniel at her feet.

"Enchanting," I say, as the bourbon burns down to my empty stomach.

"This set of porcelain was to be her wedding gift from her daddy. But she couldn't marry, you see, on account of the Civil War. So he give it to her anyway as a kind of consolation prize for being an old maid."

"Tell her what happened then," says Robert.

"Oh she married all right and had...."

"Fourteen kids," says Robert.

"Fourteen that *lived*. And we descended from the second youngest son. He was supposed to be the best lookin' too."

"That I believe," I say. Verna gives my arm a squeeze and Lili sloshes more bourbon into my teacup. "Gotta catch you up. Bobby?" She hands him a teacup and Robert takes it and raises his pinky with a simper. We women burst out laughing.

"Thanks anyway." Robert takes a glass from the cupboard and pours himself a stiff shot. He surveys the half gallon bottle and raises an eyebrow.

"Oh go on," says Verna. "It's a party."

"Mom's kin owned a lot of land back in Georgia till the Depression came along," Robert says, running tap water into his glass. "Lotta land."

"You mean they hung onto it through the Civil War?" I say.
"Sherman's March?"

"Yup. Worked it with their own hands after all the nigras left," says Verna. "Just like in *Gone with the Wind*."

"They had the biggest still in the county," Robert says, and Lili wheels on him.

"She don't need to know that."

"Oh for God's sake." Robert sniffs the air. "What's burning?"

"Oh land, I clean forgot." Verna yanks open the oven to reveal a smoking cast-iron skillet of scorched yellow cornbread. "Ain't too bad," she says and picks up a flimsy potholder to seize the heavy pan, which dips in her wobbly grasp and falls, skidding. Lili screams.

"Goddamn it." Robert grabs a towel and hoists the pan onto the counter. We peer at a swelling red welt on Lili's calf.

"Ain't so bad," Lili says, reaching for her drink.

"Stop it, Mom. We've got to get you treated."

"On my birthday too," says Lili and sips and cries.

"It's nobody's fault," I say, feeling the bourbon.

"Get in the car," says Robert. He takes his mother by the arm, but she jerks away.

"We've been cookin' all day," says Verna. "Your favorites, ham hocks n' navy beans, chicken-fry steak, fresh tomatas, mashed potatas n' gravy."

"Hey," says Robert. "Whose birthday is it anyway?" Both ladies laugh.

"I done buttered it up," says Lili. "See? It'll be fine."

"That's not what you're supposed to do with a burn, Mom."

"Don't go tellin' your mother what to do," snaps Verna. "Mr. Joe College. She's been around a lot longer than you and she knows a hell of a lot more." Robert salutes his mother and drinks.

"Sally gonna make it?"

"No, Ken had to work," says Lili.

"Sure he did." Robert turns to me. "Dad thinks Ken wasn't good enough to marry my sister, which is true of course because

Ken's a lazy fuckup. But there's no bad situation that dad can't make worse, so he treats Ken like shit..."

"Bobby, you stop that! What's this girl gonna think of us, and she ain't even ate yet? C'mon. Everything's ready." Lili begins dishing food onto the china plates with unsteady hands, spilling some.

Paul reenters, freshly shaved and dressed in a plaid sport coat, a yellow shirt and a wine-colored tie, his hair slicked back. He catches my eye and nods once, curtly.

"Don't we look fancy," Verna says. Paul stoops to examine Lili's leg.

"What'd you go and do now?"

"Nothing you need to bother over," Lili says. Paul turns to Robert.

"You know what happens she gets to drinkin' in the daytime. If you'd a got here when you was supposed to, she'd a ate somethin' by now." He continues past the kitchen, jingling car keys.

"And just where do you think you're going?" Robert says.

"Play a little cards." Everybody stares. "I'll be back for dinner."

"Dinner's now," Lili wails. "Paul, you set your ass down." But Paul continues toward the door.

"You goddamn son of a bitch," says Robert.

"Ahhhh," Paul waves his hand dismissively. "You've gone and ruind your mom's birthday anyway."

"I'm here, Paul." says Robert. "You walk out that door and you're the one ruining Mom's birthday." Paul continues out, slamming the door.

"It's a sickness, honey." Verna says as Lili sinks into a kitchen chair. Verna brings Lili her teacup, and we all look at the floor.

"He lost near two hundred last week at loball," Lili says. "I don't know what to do with him." Robert starts for the door, cursing around the cigarette he is lighting.

"Don't you take after him," says Verna. She and Lili run out the door, and I quickly refill my teacup before they reenter with Robert in tow.

My head is whirling pleasantly. I polish off a breaded steak, two pieces of the carboniferous cornbread and a bowl of beans. Robert, too, eats with appetite, but Verna, who is really drunk, just nibbles at her food and smokes, while Lili eats nothing at all. "Mom, eat something. It's a great meal."

"Rober'," Lili snaps, "you jus' mind your own. damn. bidness." Robert answers with a little boy pout. Lili is not amused and turns away, shaking her head. Decades of disappointment drag her features down, revealing a woman who considers most of her life to have been a wrong turn.

"Where your folks from?" Verna asks me, her head bobbing.

"Los Angeles, by way of Chicago."

"And whuz your dad do?"

"He's a consultant in... systems management. For corporations." I look straight into her eyes and smile. "My mom runs a children's store."

"Such a 'complish family. You Jews," Verna leans forward and narrows her eyes, "are soooo smart! No wonder you own half the world."

"Jews are just like everybody else, Auntie" says Robert.

"They are not, Robert." Verna bridles. "How come you always contradic' me? Whatever I say, you take the other side. Never fails." Robert gives me a helpless look, and I am beset with a demonic urge to giggle. I look down quickly and cough.

"I always wanted to go to college," says Lili.

"You still can, Mom."

"I'm tired of it, Rober', dontcha know? Goddamn tired." Lili nearly loses her balance on the chair, and Robert stands up quickly.

"Let's get you to bed."

Verna too rises unsteadily. "I'll be headin' home."

“Hang on, Verna. I'll give you a ride. Isobel can look after mom.” He takes Verna by the arm and walks her out the door, leaving me alone with Lili, who again begins to topple.

“Here, let me help you.” She grabs for my arms, and I pull her up off the chair and begin backing toward where I believe the bedrooms are. As I support her steadily wilting weight down the hallway, I have one of those moments in which you suddenly become lucidly aware of the extreme oddness of existence, your own in particular; the utter improbability and yet inevitability of being in this very place and time.

The bedroom is bright yellow; a set of veneered furniture in some Spanish motif nearly takes up the entire space: a gargantuan chest of drawers with vicious, riveted pewter corners and a headboard worthy of a conquistador. Massive bed tables bear huge, overflowing ashtrays. All leftover space is filled with gimcracky figurines and framed crosstitch samplers yellowed with time or cigarette smoke.

I arrange the frayed patchwork quilt as best I can and lay Lili on top; after a moment I take off her shoes. I carry out the ashtrays and dump them in the kitchen trash. When I get back, she is asleep. Fighting an impulse to study her face, I return to the kitchen and begin to clear the table and wash the dishes, helping myself to more bourbon.

An hour later, I go into the living room and find the remote deep amid the couch cushions and turn on the television. At one a.m., I go down the hallway to the bedroom in which Robert put my overnight bag, change into pajamas, brush my teeth and get into bed.

I am awakened in pitch black by shouting, then a shattering crash, and another.

“Go on,” Lili says. “Do 'em all.”

The crashes continue as I listen, blinking. A child waking into the nighttime clashes of adults is an ancient, universal experience, and the dread too is universal and often justified. The dark is pregnant with menace, but also with anticipation. Shamming sleep,

you are a clandestine audience, taking in unimaginably juicy and terrifying new information. Secrets are revealed, mysteries solved for better or worse, usually worse. And each uttered word holds the potential to change the landscape of life forever.

You debate whether to stay put in hopes of peaceful resolution, or to reveal yourself and demand explanations, exact concessions. Most of the time though, you lie immobile, fearful of diverting the conflict onto yourself. More than anything, you wish for morning, which lies galaxies away, across the sky.

I rise at last and crack open my door to peek out. The teacups lie in wicked curved shards all up and down the hallway, and as I watch, a couple of dinner plates sail past and shatter on the linoleum floor.

“What the fuck's going on?” Robert comes pounding down the hallway. He throws open the bedroom door, and I see that Paul now wields a large sewing scissors from which dangles a dress, its sleeve nearly amputated.

Robert twists the scissors out of Paul's hand and hurls them onto the floor, as Lili shouts, look out, look out, don't don't don't. Paul looks stupidly at Robert, and they disappear from view, grappling. Lili rises only to rebound, seconds later, onto the bed.

“You're going to kill him,” she implores above the grunting and shuffling.

“I hope I do. Fucking old bastard.”

I leave my room and begin to cross the hallway before I remember the shards. Too late, I feel a bite under my left heel, but before I can look, I blunder into Robert and Paul rolling across the bedroom floor. They knock me over like a bowling pin, and I grab Robert's hands and try to pull them from around his father's neck.

“Robert, stop!”

“You're going to kill him,” Lili shrieks again and sprawls across the bed, reaching down to grab at Robert, who finally lets go of Paul.

Paul looks at us all with a blank, unknowing stare. “Try puttin' a pillow under your ass,” he says to me. Robert shakes his head.

“Go back to bed, Isobel,” he says. “Please?”

But I go into the kitchen and grab the box of china and carry it into the living room. All of the cups are gone and most of the gold-bordered dinner plates, but a large soup tureen, the saucers and soup bowls are still intact. I notice a piece of paper between two saucers and draw it out. It is a letter, written in pencil, dated April 10, 1864. The paper, which looks like ruled stationery, is soft and thin, the penmanship precise:

My dearest Beatrice,

By this time, you must surely know of the esteem in which I hold you and always have done. The uncertainty of our present circumstances gives me no reason to presume that you would look favorably upon a proposal of marriage from one who may not even rely upon seeing another sunrise. Nevertheless, the thought of you is the sweetest joy to me, and I cannot rest without asking you to consider becoming my cherished wife directly these hostilities should cease.

I need not assure you, my dearest, that you command the utmost respect and the tenderest solicitude of which I am capable. I live only to comfort you and to provide the security which you deserve. I do not wish to burden you with my entreaties, but only desire selfishly to carry with me the knowledge that your eyes will soon see and perhaps look kindly upon this proposal from a heart that will be loyal so long as it beats and through Eternity as well.

With highest regard, Jeremy Sinclair,

Capt., CSA

I stand helpless, holding the letter while time seems to swirl around me. For a moment I consider taking it with me, to keep it safe from Paul and Lili's slicing and ripping and burning; their need to annihilate. But I finally replace it and cover the box with another cushion. My foot is bleeding, though the stains are nearly invisible on the blaring carpet. As I return to my room, Robert holds up a slashed blouse for me to see.

“Lunatic.” He strides down the hall, slippers crunching on broken china, and returns moments later with a roll of large black

plastic bags, a broom and dustpan. He rips off a bag, inflates it with a violent shake, and loads the clothes quickly into it. Then he sweeps up the china and throws it into the bag with the clothes. When he opens the back door, a rush of cool night air brings a sweet, mysterious fragrance. I hear him open a trash can outside, then jam the lid back down and re-enter, locking the door behind him.

The lights go off, and the house becomes very still. I creep back into bed, but soon crave the cool outdoors so powerfully that I am driven to tiptoe, giddy with fear, down the hall, open the back door and glide out into the yard.

Without ambient light, the sky is so thick with stars they seem almost smeared across the black vault: the true, primal sky. I stand rooted with astonishment and nearly scream when Robert comes up behind and wraps his arms around me.

"C'mon." He takes my hand and guides me across the yard to his car, where I lie in the back seat still transfixed by the sky through the windows.

"I had to let you see it. I can't lie about them any more."

"It's okay."

"I know I don't have the right to ask you to.... be with me. After that." He holds me so tightly I lose my breath, then pulls my pajamas down and enters me with a sob, stroking my hair and saying my name over and over.

"We don't have to end up like them," he says. "I'd rather be dead."

I awaken to painful brightness--the sun pouring through the flimsy curtains of my room has ignited the walls, my limbs, the very air into flaring turquoise. I rise into this dancing pall of blue and stretch silently, holding the knowledge of Robert's and my new, deeper love gingerly, afraid to think about it lest it vanish. Perhaps it is already gone.

Children's shouts and morning sounds come in through the open sliding window. I grab my overnight bag, and steal down the hallway to the bathroom, where I confront myself in the mirror like an old, lost friend. The reflection is not true and elongates my face

like a Modigliani. My eyes, circled beneath, gaze back at me conspiratorially, wide and bemused. What the hell? I mouth at myself.

From a rusty nozzle, I turn on tepid water and brush my teeth amid moaning pipes. The shower is a yellowing fiberglas Durastall unit with holes punched for the head and handles. I quickly climb in, soaping with a slimy-soft bar that I find on the moldy rubber mat. I wash my hair with it too, and it turns my waist-length hair into a tangled heap, which I comb through as best I can. I hurriedly apply mascara and lipstick with shaking hands, then return quietly to my room and close the door. The blue conflagration has faded to pastel, but the brief morning coolness is giving way before heat flexing its strength at nine a.m.

I make my bed and sit, only now allowing myself to glance around. When I spot high school yearbooks, I seize one and page through it greedily for pictures of Robert. I am not disappointed. He is on the flyleaf, crouched in a football uniform; then caught in a candid with gavel poised in a meeting of the student senate. Pages later, tuxedoed, he escorts a homecoming princess.

Outside my room, I hear stirring at last: Paul's heavy tread and the click of a cigarette lighter. In the kitchen, the refrigerator door opens. "Pork chops n' aiggs," Paul sings out. Lili shuffles down the hallway, smoking.

"Isobel," she calls out, "coffee's on. You sleep okay, honey?" I leave my bedroom and enter the kitchen at the same time as Robert does, still in his bathrobe. He cadges a cigarette from his father, who lights it for him solemnly. They exchange laconic looks and suddenly burst out laughing.

"I thought sure you was gonna raise that little Mexican bastard," Paul says, smoking with relish.

"Nahhh, I figured he was holdin' a full house."

"Sometimes I think you do got half a brain in your head." Paul guffaws, and Robert chuckles. "Musta got it from me." He winks at me, and I laugh along with everybody. "What you kids got goin' today?"

"I thought I'd take Isobel over to meet Earl n' Marie," Robert says, looking at me for the first time.

"Oh that'll be nice," says Lili, beating eggs. "They was askin' after you just the other day." Paul crosses the kitchen and sets a coffee mug in front of me and fills it.

"You take cream n' sugar?"

"Black is fine," I say.

"That's ma girl." Paul shakes a Marlboro from his pack and offers it to me. After a moment's hesitation, I pluck it out, and he lights it. "I hear things got a little lively here last night," he says. "You gotta get used to us."

"Oh, I slept just fine," I say. Robert comes over and puts his arm around me, and I duck my head, eyes suddenly stinging; feelings trapped deep beneath the surface taking wing at last.

