

Campbell & Evans

by Sturla Grey

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Half-sleep on her side, vaguely aware her thigh skin had been burning in the sun, Colleen lay in a hinter-state. A sensation that she was already dead, the bones inside her skin melting into a soup, her very being dissolving. Awareness was outside looking back into her body watching this organic confluence of matter. Someone turned on a boom box with AC/DC announcing a highway to hell. She lifted her head to check and see if her child was nearby. Still in the same place as when Colleen had laid her head down just for a moment, the child stood at the shore's edge hurling the largest stones she could find into the crashing waves. More and more lately Colleen dwelt upon her own death quite involuntarily. It entered her awareness more as a presence than a thought, her bones would melt into this sack of skin, her child would walk the earth without a mother.

The day was pristine, the sand dry and hot, the sea sparkled emerald and warm, the water sixty-four degrees Fahrenheit, a cobalt ceiling allowed just enough air space for the gliders to float by, dragged by boats. An eighth of a mile away towered the nuclear domes, churning heat and split atoms into electricity. Colleen spent hours in the water surfing and often wondered if she was steeping in radioactive soup the government didn't feel necessary to tell folks was bleeding out from the reactors. Fish swam beneath her surfboard, one head, one pair of eyes, she counted.

Early the same morning Colleen and her child had rolled into the state park and found an open parking spot next to a large blue tent with a signage for the Cal State Veterans Association. The soldiers were coming out to celebrate Memorial Day. A heavy set young woman with a baseball cap and a young Asian man were sitting by the tent expectantly, drinking alcohol from red Solo cups. Soon after Colleen and the child had settled down in their parcel on the sand the vets began to arrive.

Regarding each arrival, Colleen could tell immediately the difference between a vet and a relation. A sharp edge, a suspicion, a broken wing, even without the camouflage knapsack or jarhead shave there was a tone and a flavor to each one, each had seen something, lost something of irreplaceable value. Ten feet away a man of about thirty five years lay on a towel face down with Ipod plugs in his ears. Blonde hair efficiently trimmed into a jar head shape, slightly red from the sun, face expressionless. An island surrounded by comrades.

Coming fully into her body and awake now Colleen, by will, lifted her spirit, pulled her head into alignment with her purpose. A shadow of death lay about her and she decided to ignore it, like the other days, when it knocked and knocked at her consciousness wanting total attention. Lately she thought of her child being alone, tried to imagine how she would get along with no protection, no support, wondered if she would learn to make friends and find people who love her. A finely drawn sense that life was half through and it would be a fleeting moment until she was saying good-bye. In this urgent sense of time running out Colleen had disconnected the television in their house and refused to listen to gossip about celebrities, lottery winners, reality show stars who numbered so many there would be no way to keep track of them all with what time was left. Time was guarded like a golden commodity and Colleen felt she never did enough with what time she had. Her very breath was squandered.

There was no luxury of entertaining a sense of doom with her child around. She marshaled her entire will to lift her spirits up, she faked it each waking hour, Colleen played a cheerful if preoccupied character in her child's play, chirping if need be, dismissing the defeats they saw and accentuating how good the child's future would be. Colleen did not want the child to inherit her doom. At all costs she brought up her will, and acted the part of a faithful traveler with a smile, and a steady look that could not betray the ever-present sense that her life was about to end at any minute.

*Corporal John Mark Evans First Battalion, 143rd Field Artillery Regiment,
Bravo Battery.*

Member of the firing platoons, howitzer section. My shrink told me it's a good thing to do, come to these alumni events on holidays. Staying alive one day at a time. They tell us that staying alive has some kind of inherent virtue to it. I don't see it. Here staying alive because my boys are not. In the silence of my room the ending calls so clearly, there is nothing else around me but a clear path to leaving this life. There is nothing here for me. I see limbs in the hot dogs they roast on that grill and I hear my fellow men calling out as they see the outer gate and depart, leaving behind wives, kids, mortgages. I stay alive because they did not want to go and I got to stay. Man I fuckin' well have no reason to be here. That liquor has no place in me if I am going to follow orders. Suck it down and I am done, dead as a dog bloating up in the hot desert sun.

The usual suspects. Cady with the booze, Marcus, Limons, with the meat. I lose track after that. Too many people, faces, voices. They all know my name but no one will approach. We all know the drill. Some of us are more fucked up than others. Two categories clearly

drawn: the combat soldier, and any other kind of soldier. Black Flag in my ears, the sun is drilling into my back. I will pay for it later and I'll not give one red shit. The kids are playing down by the water's edge, teenagers, young ones.

My boys have kids here, their wives are all remarried. It's like my boys were never here, except they have kids walking the face of the earth. Kids who never think of them anymore. I see a boy of fourteen and I remember I had no aspirations for war then. At fourteen I would live forever, I thought I would fly planes, thought I would be a doctor. Very interested in playing football then and I had a lot of friends. My parents were good to me. When I enlisted I thought it would be good on a resume and pay for my college. The man who enlisted back then, that excited, grown-up-feeling man who had the world for an oyster, who is that man? Nothing is like what I thought it could be, the sounds are not the same, time passes like a prison sentence, there is a man living in me who I did not invite there. Took up residence somewhere outside Kabul, came into me like a ghost and the real "me" left then. I live outside and he lives inside and I have to go on this ride because I get to be alive.

Private Miguel "Mike" Juan Carlos Campbell, USARAK Alaska 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division

The white t-shirt comes off and he puts on his wide brimmed straw hat with the chin strap counting silently the number of women who have shown up, where they have laid their towel and placed their chairs in the sand, which ones are taken and which ones appear to be on the market. Sifting through each of the familiar faces, he is ready with a smile, small talk, *what have you been doing since the last one of these things*. A good listener and a good talker, there is work behind the winsome presentation. Top-selling insurance agent in his office with a fourteen-year-old boy who thinks his dad is a complete idiot.

Campbell sees her laying there a little while after the third vodka from a Solo cup is downed and it registers she is civilian. Long blonde hair, heavy on the bottom half, she's wearing a lose t-shirt over her bathing suit. Campbell figures her for insecure, filed under easy for later if no better prospects arise. His right hand glides smoothly over his bare chest, as he feels over his pectoral muscle and preens, the sun warming his shoulders.

In the momentary pause of waiting for the next flash of small talk and the canned laughter machine, he remembers that girl's hand laying across his chest, pearlized pink fingernails, her small ruby ring on the right pinky. A pang flashes that he has no hesitation in putting away. Sees her leaving, running out the front door in her long t-shirt with her overnight bag slung over her shoulder, tiny skinny legs jutting out, stepping. She found photographs, proof. He would never explain it or apologize. He threw away her diaphragm when he ran across it on the back of his toilet later. He knew he would never hear from her again. There was a girl out there who would understand his appetites. Everything is a numbers game, you just play it out until the odds unfold and you hold in your hand that reward from your persistence. He pushes out the idea of where she is now, what she is doing. It has been four days.

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Colleen is immersed in a book when a shadow passes over her towel and a body is sitting there. She looks up to see a man, Latin, close-shaved hair, mirrored sunglasses, straw hat.

"Hi, I see your daughter is just down there playing all alone."
Campbell says.

Colleen looks up. "I'd hear about it if she had a problem with it."

Colleen pointedly tries getting back into the book, Campbell puts his hand out.

“Mike Campbell, nice to meet you.”

She shakes his hand back, retreating again into the book.

“I have a son here, and his cousin.” Campbell motions toward the two teenaged boys sitting, eyes closed, in lounge chairs.

“Very nice.” There is a sensation of running, but she is sitting right there, book open in her lap.

“I could ask them to play with her.”

“Okay”, Colleen watches as Campbell goes over and gives one of the boys a set of paddles and a ball. The slouching drag of the boy's feet shows all *no*, but he walks toward her child anyway.

That morning the little girl had told Colleen she wanted to travel to France one day.

“Have you been to France?” the little girl had asked.

Colleen explained all her favorite places in France, her very best the south, Nice, St. Paul de Vence, the dry heat and creamy sun. The child reckoned St. Paul a fairy kingdom, the bastion on the hill. Colleen pulled up photos on her phone, the stone walls, lushly-vined gardens, lavender fields in the sunlight.

“What was the very best thing you had to eat there?”

Colleen explained that even the water tasted of heaven in France. But the very best thing had been a pesto over linguine, as simple as one could imagine, and she explained how the flavors transported you to another world, a paradise, how the French grow their basil in the hot Provençal sun and all the flavor of the earth lives in it. France had these transports available to the traveler all around, a sip of coffee, a taste of bread melting in the mouth. Colleen craved

the rosé, still it came up in front of her at the supermarket, she tucked it away under past extravagance. The little girl vowed to travel to St. Paul de Vence. Colleen explained to the little girl that her mother would see to it.

Colleen thought of the shop owner in St. Paul who had taken a liking to her, Gilles. They climbed inside his two-door Volkswagen Golf back then, in the black of night, the intention to go to Nice for some Indian food and some clubbing. Gilles conquered the tiny road down the mountain pushing 90 kilometers per hour. They took up space in the oncoming lane every time a corner rose up in the road. Colleen's heart would stop. Gilles was stone silent and for the first five kilometers, Colleen kept quiet until on one sharp turn the back end of the coupe skidded out and an oncoming car honked crazily at them. Gilles said fuck in English.

“Can you please slow down just so I don't have a heart attack?”
Colleen had asked meekly.

“You American women — why are you always, what — *breaking ze balls!*”

To Colleen it was clear that “breaking ze balls” was a negative. Gilles enforced his right to drive murderously fast for no good reason, they were not in a hurry, it was ten o'clock at night. That first suspicion that she might get laid melted away with the curiosity of whether she would live to board the plane back home.

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“Mike” had been talking for awhile when Colleen registered that the boy was playing paddle ball with her little girl, and the girl was

hitting remarkably well.

“She likes it.” Mike claimed.

“I’m pretty impressed she is hitting so well. I didn’t know.”
Colleen watched as the volley continued into the 10th and 11th hits.

A conversation began, as reluctant and robbed of the time alone Colleen felt, she found herself thanking Mike for his service to the country.

“Never saw combat. We were stationed in Alaska. Long retired now.”

Colleen remarked that it must have been a cold assignment. Mike’s face was too close. She wanted to ask him to move away at least twelve inches. She saw his yellowish teeth and a dark half moon at the top of one of his incisors in front. Writhing for space she smiled and looked down at her book so she would not panic.

“It was cold.” Campbell remarked. “And dark. But it was wild. I myself was engaged at the time but I watched the ladies and the men take off their wedding rings up there and have a good old time.” He laughed — pictures traveled across his mind of bodies and mouths and the sex and the liquor, he could taste the flesh and the alcohol right then, strong, immediate. “I was engaged to a girl who had a child already.”

Colleen was repulsed by his lying, his smile. Tolerance had to be handed out, she couldn’t ask him to move away. His son was playing with her daughter, his helpfulness was all over her and she could not move away. The hair in his arm pits, the sweat in the bend of his clavicle and the male smell of him sent her screaming inside, she was pinned down, the exact pressure over her throat made it impossible to move as a piece of his body entered her and a piece of

her perished simultaneously. There were expressionless police officers. Clicking ball point pens, the stale, flat hue of indifference. It never happened. It did not happen. Fluorescent lights decried her accusation and neutralized her on the spot.

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Campbell does not quit. This smug sonofabitch, it's just the same every time. Would be great to film a video one of these times and play it back to him just to shut his arrogant ass up. Aw, let her have him. She's fat enough to be his mother. Let them have each other.

Sand is a mesmerizing thing and you can run it through your fingers for hours, it will never come out the same way twice. *P I L* : Public Image Limited. That fucking bass line is all I have sometimes, it beats my heart, it gets irregular, *you never listen to a word that I said, you only seen me for the clothes that I wear -*

If I put on those Dockers and a nice plaid shirt she might talk to me, too. As fat as she is she is undoubtedly grateful in bed. I could roll her over and do it in the back — I got this song in my head and it's not going to leave. I like it like that, keeps the committee in my head quiet, they always say I should be grateful to be alive. Makes me want to shoot a gun off. Stopped eating animal flesh, the smell of it reminds me of the dead bodies.

The taste of the Corn Nuts is making me thirsty. Too lazy to get up for water. The sand through my fingers hypnotizes me, and I think of the traffic heading home tonight. This is why I drive alone. Can't fucking stand people. The Campbells of this world make me want to puke.

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As she regards the kids playing paddle ball a fight breaks out. Two younger men, thick with muscles, deltoids bulging hotly with tattoos, one throws the other on the sand, his head bends back as two young women watch with glee, clapping, cheering them on. They fall and roll and thunder too close to the child.

“Oh — these two are wrestlers.” Mike explains. Sand flies up in a curtain.

Colleen watches silently. It's too late, too slow to try and move them away from the paddle ball players, who step back from the commotion. The homoeroticism of it is impossible for her to displace, she sees a hand go between the legs and their faces pressed together as if fighting the fact that intercourse is on its way.

In the night Colleen would bathe her tired child in lukewarm water and cover her body with aloe to soothe the over exposure to the sun. The quiet of the night would reverberate outside the open windows and be moved by the distant singing of night birds in the city. In the darkness Colleen would pull up the website on her computer and see the photographs in her newsfeed from the child's father, click on them, see him in St. Paul de Vence this very day, always alone in photographs, sunglasses, a cigarette, a glass of scotch. There he is in St. Paul de Vence, sitting at Columbe D'Or, riding the single lane roads outside of Cannes in a rented Mercedes, a fedora covering his head, chains draped across his bare chest. The proud figures from a successful film he just sold posted, the millions. He stayed alone. It was just the fact that the child deserved more. Not a whole father; perhaps tuition money, perhaps the assurance of a home when Colleen could not get work. She did not hate him. Never wanted him. There was this vague desire for some of his honey to drip into the child's life so she could have something better than a two bedroom apartment and financial aid.

There was the pang and the knowing that it all meant something,

that her child had just brought up France today, and there he was in the south. Golden, sun lit him from behind. He had not thought of the child since he learned of its impending arrival. She regarded his photograph, as stylishly outfitted as he was, he looked gaunt and deadly unhappy to her. He was always pictured alone always and forever with his cigarette freshly lit.

Colleen breathed in the relief that he was far away and stayed there.

The pang, the echo of what the intersection of her child's questions and the father's exact locale in the south of France that same day might mean just dissolved and she lay down in the dark and closed her eyes.

Without really noticing how it happened, Colleen found herself alone again on the sand.

They talked of politics for a moment and Colleen marveled that Pvt. Mike Campbell was a liberal, according to his own proclamation. There was a momentary meeting of the minds until Colleen stated she was registered independent. Upon further circumspection, she answered Pvt. Campbell's question as to why:

"Some of my views are obscenely conservative", she said.

"How?"

"I am anti-abortion, staunchly." deadpanned Colleen.

Mike had walked away without saying a word after a respectable pause in the banter, a boon that came without a prayer.

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God almighty, look at that dumb-ass, just as dumb as all hell, the girl

has everything packed up, surfboards racked on top, and there he is again. He'll try one last time to get her number, no matter the little girl looking at him with that blank stare. I see her face looking away, her shoulders square, she is not smiling at him, goddamned retard sonofabitch that Campbell. Knows no one here is dumb enough to want to fuck him but he just keeps on trying like a dog humping the air.

Sun is setting and the wind come up, blowing close to a gale and the smell of the meat is going upwind from me. For this I am grateful. The blue station wagon finally pulls out and Campbell stands there, dick in his hand. Jig is up comrade. You fuckin' nincompoop. All a sudden the thumping starts and my blood is boiling.

There's a bass line in my ears and I rip the cords from there, the rush of the sea pounding on the shore enters my brain for the first time all day — there it is, the thumping, cutting whacking, the air chopping under the propellers of army black hawks. Camp Pendelton is doing rounds, on fucking Memorial Day! My teeth are chattering.

“What's up Evans?” I look over and see a wasted Limons laughing at me, his head is going back he is laughing at me.

Limons is pointing “Evans looks like he's seen one badass ghost!”

I am on my feet without feeling my body. Running, the choppers are coming around the hill and looming, six, now seven of them coming toward us. I am running, flying into the water, my sunburned skin sizzling against the cold waves washing over me as I swim away. The thumping is rattling the ground, the sand is like a bass drum against the thump of the propellers. I am going under, I pull, breast stroking against the water and the pull of the current, going deeper, holding my breath. I stop on the sandy bottom, feel the current of crashing waves moving over me, I open my eyes and look up, there

is nothing but sky. But the thumping is cutting through the water like knives, seven black hawks slicing through the water with aerodynamic power, beating my heart, controlling my pulse. I will stay under here all night if they do not fly away. I got absolutely no reason to be on this earth.

