

# The Crest

*by* Sturla Grey

It is silent. In the cockpit of the silver electric car, not an ambient thrill of air, or light, or sound waves moving around from a distant source. In this moment I realize it is the silence I was waiting for, the growing hunger for the void fighting its way out from inside my skin in a war of despair. Millions of stars, dazzling in their silence and grandiosity, their ancient fires piercing the black sky. The road is invisible in the darkness, empty, placid, perfectly smooth, divided by one thick, painted white line that makes an immaculate arc around the mountain curve where I sit in the driver's seat.

In the heat of day I sat here, then I was thirsty, as I watched cars swoosh past, motorcycles leaning into the curve on their sides, riders breaking the speed law to feel something. August heat crackled the tree tops below the towering crest, kindling, the Sun lit up the silica flecks in the asphalt, diamonds, a hardness to the light, merciless, burning. Now it's a movie, thinking about the afternoon, hours dwindling past that way, the baby would be awaking from an afternoon nap at this part of the story, his body a parcel of powder, peaches, sugar, heather. He would be listening for the voice and laughter of his big brother.

Drawn here effortlessly, really, the car drove itself, out of the driveway of our family home in North Hollywood, as I backed out, knowing I would never see Arianne or the boys again, the car really drove itself, pulled purposefully onto the five and headed southeast. I would not see them again, ever again, after two weeks of contemplating this form of reality the car drove me out here to complete this.

My boy Eli. Can I tell you, he has large watery eyes like his mother, but blue. No one knows where those blue eyes came from, but he looks at you. In his thin hospital burrito blanket, wrapped tightly as

a pupa, only hours old, his eyes were wide and big and watery like his mama's and he looked straight into me. That never stopped, his looking. You have things in life all around, things you earn and pay for, things that are given to you, Eli was grace. Arianne was grace also, right now I see this as their genetic connection as well, their grace upon me, from some puppeteer beyond who saw fit to grace me with these.

*Baruch Ata Adonai Eloheinu Melech Ha'Olam Dayan Ha'Emet*

How she flew in, dark Arianne, pale, slight. She nestled into me. There was no question. It happens like that in life at times, a falling into place with no thought, no action, it can just happen. Lori Kruger, I wore that narrow blue suit jacket and navy blue slacks to the first dance at school with Lori Kruger. Her lace blouse and feathered brown hair, we sat on a green sofa in her parents' living room, her father drove us and she wore white stockings. We didn't touch except for one slow dance at arm's length. I never considered her beyond the paper doll cut out of a girl, she made me smile, I didn't think of her breasts or between her legs, we were twelve. I was proud to walk into the auditorium with her, and that was the first time I felt like a man.

The clock says twelve minutes since the last car came by. I turn on the ignition, its hum disturbs my silence and I am already longing to return to the entrance of the void. The turning of the ignition is a dreadfully violent act, spirits are moving quickly, flashing, a lightening has entered the air, prickling my skin, and I am inoculated to it by my hunger for silence. A cavalry of faeries are screaming all around my head, horses hooves stampede toward the nameless void, Arianne is looking for me, there are voices speaking to her and she does not understand, my parents are there. My mother took me in her arms and cradled me, there were blue drapes with a grey light pouring through them, my blankets were warm. The accelerator meets the bottom of my bare foot quietly and I

press, suddenly, with force, press all my weight into the leg and foot and grip the wheel.

The car is moving faster than I thought it could, through the black air, as it leaves the gravel spray and crosses onto the asphalt the silence returns suddenly, a balm, a sweetness I drink into me as I leave the earth in my silver capsule and am finally flying high above the trees, free of the crest, the last ninety seconds of my life fill me, my freedom, my sparseness, I am weightless in the cockpit with no seat belt as the car crashes down I feel nothing, my head splits open against a crack of hard glass, I feel nothing, and then there is flying.

There is a glimpse of the dimension from the outside, yet I am inside, I occupy another dimension simultaneously for an instant as I converge, and in the instant I can see and I can know and there is a signal going back to the ridge, I signal out there for Arianne, she must know this, evolve to it, in order to live.

Behind me I feel the silent wave of my cell phone traveling forty one miles to the south, pinging against a tower near Cudahy, California.

• • • •

We broke up for about four months once. We were together and inseparable for a time, close to a year, and then we mutually decided in a clean and direct way to split, and we did not talk, nor see each other for almost four months. I thought little of him then. I didn't sleep with any other boys, but I also did not think of Ben. I had this suspicion that I was better than this, the pairing with Ben, who was smart but not wealthy or shining like a prince. He was pedestrian and solid and he adored me unlike anyone had. There was this superiority in me that was piggish.

Then I saw him at a funeral of a mutual friend's father this one time, totally unexpectedly. He was wearing a crisp blue suit, dark with a

light blue pressed shirt and a striped tie that had a dash of pink in it. He saw me. We did not speak. After the closing prayer I walked with him silently and we climbed into his car. We drove to the Peninsula Hotel and got a room. On the way up the elevator he asked how I had been.

When he closed the heavy wood door behind us I felt a deep breath of relief roll through me, and he stepped up to me and ate at my mouth hungrily. He gently removed my blouse and deliberately sucked my breast into his mouth and I tore away my skirt and stockings to let his cock get to me, get inside me.

There was a tremendous lust that blotted everything out and I grew afraid when I saw in his face how much he loved me, more wanted me, it was desperation I saw and I knew that he'd been thinking of me and had been in pain and I felt then I would not leave Ben again. It was decided. We lay in the giant bed afterward for hours, not talking. The room grew black with night. All I wanted to do was lay in his smell, I had missed him and didn't know it before now. He got up to urinate at one point and his absence was obscene to me.

Mother is walking around in the kitchen now, voices. I had fallen asleep with Eli in my arms until my eyes opened, sandpaper and blood, and I started thinking about the break up. It was lifetimes ago. We've stayed married for seven years since that day of the funeral and now Ben is lost somewhere.

There was always something here, a person, a being, or an Awareness, I realize this right now in the dark, all around me and it is cupping me and Eli now, and it's holding the people in our living room for all the past four days and five nights we have been searching for Ben. Or it could be me simply here looking back at myself from a perspective just a few seconds off into the future. The presence, the seeing, him, her, It, sees the layout of this thing, the landscape of things here with Ben missing. It has an indifference, a

peace in not responding to my slow-boiling panic inside. I am crumpled in the legs, my knees smashed up like tracing paper, and the knowing sees this.

The knowing conveys to me that I will never see Ben alive again, on the deepest nuclear level, and I ignore this, I call to Ben, I scream for Ben, as though my demand can call him home.

Eli is stirring at his grandmother's voice, smells food cooking, he is squirming away from me, going. He opens the door and the light sears my eyes, he toddles out to the voices, more people have arrived. My mother pokes her head in the crack left by Eli.

“The baby needs to nurse.” She whispers to me.

I tell her to use frozen breast milk though I have no words.

She quietly shuts the door and I am in the dark again. I am considering Ben's face. Pale, his skin translucent, deep brown eyes and nearly black hair, thick and wavy, playing away from his face, that open face, kindness. Transmuted into a disconsolate mask over the past few weeks. Ben missed out on a producing job that would have saved our mortgage, but it was more than the money, it was something big. He had not done something big yet and all the work leading up to this chance was adding up to what he wanted -to be something big, and he didn't get it.

A vortex of disappointment kicked up from that “No”. It took him over. Not being able to shake it, I was surprised when he said he would see a psychotherapist three weeks after the rejection and on the day we got the foreclosure notice. He felt he was dejected beyond what was rationally acceptable and went on pills. Inconceivable, the Knowing announced there had been a major change in the weather, a shift in fate. That is when his disappearance began. It progressed from there like a slow, deliberate walk toward a precipice, a movement that could not be

halted by talking, by pills, by brainstorming.

The door cracks again. The sound of its creaking and the intent behind it enrages me.

“The detective is on the phone. He needs to talk with you.” Mother again. Her voice the anchor on the shore right next to the chasm of horror that I need to fall into, just now I see this. Hammering butterflies and a spinning sensation, the Awareness sees all of this and is still.

• • • •

Detective Sgt. Vickery said there was a ping on a tower near Cudahy. I leave the house without telling anyone and drive away, catching a glimpse of my black eyes in the mirror, my disheveled bangs. I pull over and bring my hair back in a loose bun and fasten it in a hair tie. On Ventura Boulevard the lights are shining from inside the storefronts, it's still early enough for heavy foot traffic, the car is pulling in front of a mall, with high pane glass windows, marble, escalators. Walking, the Knowing is here, a few seconds ahead of me as always, reminding me that Ben is never coming back, I walk outside my body, disenfranchised.

In the spot-lit jewelry store diamonds and platinum are twinkling against royal blue velvet. The Knowing sees me in all black in August, long sleeves, snug yoga pants covered in lint from the four day vigil of gnashing, rolling on the floor, tearing my hair out while Ben is out there annihilating himself. I am convinced the shopkeeper sees this as odd. He is willing to show me all of his jewels and more, to my surprise.

“These are the gems we have now that hold the most fire.” He lays about fifteen rocks out on the velvet before me, all of them at least ten times bigger than anything I have ever owned. Ben never bought me a diamond, there was no money for it. He gave me a

white gold band inscribed with ----

“When is your wedding?” he asks me.

“In November.” I hear myself saying, bumping off our anniversary date. I conjure the first wedding anniversary as a widow. Then I am saying inside my head, you do not know he is dead. There is a panic welling again, building like a wave, I need to run to get out of my body. And now I am not Arianne Field, I no longer exist.

“Congratulations” he says with a kind and graceful smile. “You deserve the most lovely diamond your fiancé can afford.

“I always wanted a yellow diamond.” The Awareness hears me saying. Before now I had never had the thought of a yellow diamond, nor seen one.

The cashmere-clad man, the one who I am assuming owns the shop, turns away from me with a flourish and steps behind a thick black curtain. Without hesitation my hand lifts to the velvet surface and scoops two large stones, I am guessing them to be around seven to nine carats each, and I tuck them inside the pocket of my handbag. They are smooth and heavy in my palm and slip from my fingers like liquid as I release them.

My heart is pounding. I am thinking about the mortgage. Or tickets to fly away somewhere far from Los Angeles, with the babies, the Awareness is thinking. I am thinking that if I am wrong and Ben is alive that we will return here to this shop together and Ben will explain to the shopkeeper and give back the stones. I remember that Ben will not be here to fix anything now. The Awareness hears me telling myself I do not know for sure that Ben is dead.

The stones are mine, and I am losing everything, and I am taking the stones and I will make money from taking the stones, and I will feed my boys, pay the car payment, stay someplace when the house

is taken away, with the money these stones, my stones, will bring.

The man is back with a delicate satchel full of yellow diamonds that he spreads across the velvet, my breath is taken away. With that and the pounding of my heart I am rather sure I am going to die and see Ben now without the aid of detectives. My cell phone rings. My house is calling.

I hang up, relieved to tell the jeweler that was my mother, I tell him she is ailing and I have to go. He nods kindly and I promise I will come back with my fiancé.

The stones are burning in my purse, they are calling to me. I am sure the man from the store will be following me down Ventura Boulevard, but he is not there. As I approach our Toyota minivan in the parking lot I fall to my knees. Ben is leaving the earth, the Awareness is all around me, cradling me, as Ben pulls away. He no longer knows us, he has pulled out, vaporizing as he goes, and I am a single mother, I am alone with two baby boys. The Knowing is telling me I cannot do this, go through this sick game of suicide, and I don't struggle against the fact.

• • • •

Ben's friend Elliott is driving me in his white BMW. My mother and father and Ben's father and mother, are behind us in their rental car from the airport. The sun is high, unrelenting at eleven o'clock in the morning. Grateful for Ben's brother keeping the boys at home, away from me, their crawling and crying and pulling has gotten the better of me though my breasts are too heavy with milk. As we head up the Angeles Highway the car pulls into third gear to meet the grade, the sky gets more cobalt, pressing, heavy in its depth, we do not speak over the distant sound of helicopters circling the air where a silver coupe was spotted beneath the tall pine trees in a ravine below the crest.

There are no words and we wind left, then right, then left in wide,

smooth sweeps up the mountain and the car makes almost no sound at all. Speeding mercilessly to my doom, I am already a few moments ahead with the Awareness, looking into the ravine, hearing a rescue worker tell me what has become of my husband, his body, a useless piece of remains. I consider the headache of filing a claim for the totaled Prius.

“They don't know it's him — for sure.” Elliott says.

Blood and sandpaper, I look straight out the windshield at the grip of rescue vehicles clustered by the side of the drop and Elliott slows his car to a stop. Lights flashing wildly as though something can be done.

We walk out to the crest and my mother is suddenly walking next to me, knowing better than to put a hand on me, I am alive with terror, dread, my chest cavity leaking acid into the ozone.

We peer over the edge at a winch pulling our Prius out of the trees.

“Are you the wife?” A tall man in a dark uniform and a fire hat asks me.

“Yes she is!” blurts my mother, gasping for air at the sight of the car rising up toward us.

Elliott's hand is on my back.

“We found a suicide letter at mile marker 37 right here.” He hands me a letter written in Ben's hand, a plain white piece of paper with no lines.

“Where is he.” The Awareness speaks out of my throat.

We walk wordlessly toward a form under a sheet laying on the

gurney beside an ambulance whose lights are flashing.

What is the emergency, I am thinking, he is dead, there is no emergency now.

Putting a hand near the sheet, the fireman begins "His face was disfigured in the crash, you should prepare yourself."

From far, far off, in another room I hear my mother and Ben's mother shrieking. It's a terrible sound, the sound of a mother seeing the dead and mutilated body of her first born son, the pride of her family, her beloved son. Elliott's hand is far away too. I want to touch Ben's face, suddenly I remember it is no longer his face, he pulled out, he flew away last night, he is long gone now. Still that urge to wipe it clean, put it back together again, what is left here.

I open the folded letter standing there by myself as the women are shrieking and crying and Elliott is standing there, looking out on the crest like a lost sailor. The Awareness sees the fathers standing by the crest, watching the car come up.

The letter in my hand is addressed to no one and it says:

*We suffer because we think the past is fixed and controls the future, but the reality is the opposite, the past is not fixed and the future decides it.*

