

Sea Breakers

by Dina Dwyer

Unsure of what to do after being forced to resign from her job as a painting instructor, Flo had accepted a pity housesitting gig from an old college friend. Up in the foothills, the house faced a ridge of pale-orange mountains dotted with chaparral and yucca plants, and the back garden gave a glimpse of the ocean between eucalyptus trees. Next door stood the skeleton of a new house, its tan bones glowing in the dying sun.

Inside, her friend Cheri nodded to the picture window facing the construction site next door.

“They’re pretty noisy, but they keep regular hours,” she said.

“Too bad I don’t,” Flo yawned. She scratched at her tangled black hair in the rough ponytail she’d tied over sixteen hours ago when she’d first set off for Santa Madrona. By the time her friend brought out some dinner, Flo was on the couch snoring, her arms and legs skinny and bent-in like a dead bug.

Alone in the empty house the next morning, Flo asserted her sovereignty over the place first by removing all the terrible paintings Cheri had peppered it with, and then by stripping down to her bra and tights and drinking straight from the milk carton.

Over the edge of the container, she noticed a man standing in the backyard of the construction site next door. He wore a tool belt and red suspenders over a white t-shirt and black pants. He took off his white hardhat and smoothed his fingers over his shellacked brown hair.

Flo watched him lean on a pile of wood and jab at his phone. As she reached for a peach, another figure appeared at the side gate. The man jumped up to let a woman into the yard: tight pants, lipstick, and curled long hair.

“It’s noon on a Monday, lady,” Flo said aloud.

The man gestured to the skeleton house, to the yard, to the blueprints, to the sky, and to himself. The woman’s laugh pierced the window. Then Flo watched in amazement as he picked up a hammer and demonstrated how to drive in a nail.

“Heh heh. Let me show you my other tools, sweetheart,” Flo said, tucking her chin into her neck.

He sat down on the wood pile and pulled the woman into his lap. She giggled and looked around while he ran his hands over her thighs and sides. She stood up and the two of them disappeared into a corner of the house that had some partial walls. Flo dashed into the living room and jumped on the sofa to see them through the rose-choked lattice fence, but they were invisible now.

Flo sat down and sighed. From somewhere crumpled inside her, an enormous laugh unfolded and filled the empty house. The tile floor threw her voice back at her and she covered her face with a pillow and punched it.

Flo spent her days doing what she had done for the past two months wandering on the road – reading, watching people, playing cards, drinking, and occasionally glancing at her sketchbook. She always put it back into a drawer.

On weekends she awakened long after noon, but each weekday started with the man in the red suspenders hooting and honking with the rest of the construction workers. No room in the house was safe from his voice. It overpowered even their table saw and generator.

One Friday evening in early April, Flo sat in a deck chair on the front porch and polished off most of a bottle of champagne. She watched the man in the suspenders lock the front fence to the site. As he approached his Jeep, she called out to him. His head popped up and he squinted and then smiled. He trotted over to the stairs and set his hand on the railing.

Flo tilted her chin at the bottle near her feet. “Eh?”

He laughed. “What are you celebrating?”

“Whaddya got?”

The man laughed again.

She disappeared into the house to fetch another bottle. When she returned he was draping his tool belt over the porch railing. He stared at her breast. “I like your bird,” he said. Flo remembered there was an embroidered bird on her jacket.

“Thanks. What’s –”

“I got birds, too. Wanna see?” Before she could answer, he yanked his shirt and suspenders down over his shoulder. Over his left pectoral sprawled a vibrant tableau of birds in

flight.

Flo inspected them. They shook hands.

“I’m Hank. Hank Anchors. Friends call me The Hanchorman,” he said, holding her hand a little too long.

“Flo,” she said and she gave his hand a firm squeeze. “Look, I don’t wanna fuck you. I just want someone to sit and drink with.”

Hank’s eyebrows flew up. “OK, hey, whatever. I didn’t –”

“I just wanted to be upfront with you,” Flo said. She sat back down in her deck chair. Hank remained standing. He glanced at the street but she pressed a glass into his hand before he could change his mind. He puffed a little air out his nose, smirked, and then sat down.

“Well, that’s in the past already,” she said, clinking her glass to his. He stared at it, then at her, and then downed the contents in one large gulp. She reached over to refill it.

“So, what’s your deal? I mean, you know what I do.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

“Oh,” she said. “I’m housesitting.”

He grunted and studied her face and she inspected his. Up close he was younger than she’d thought; the thick five o’clock shadow gave him a few years but there were no deep wrinkles to back it up. A ragged flat scar cut across his hairline on his left temple.

“How’d you get that?” she said, reaching out and almost touching him.

“Ah, just dirt biking in the hills. Hit a rock, took a bad scrape. Years ago in high school.”

Flo nodded and then withdrew a cigarette from her inner jacket pocket. Hank did the same, looking a little relieved.

“Do you have any cool scars?” he asked, lighting her cigarette.

She stared at him for a moment. Eh, why not, she thought. She loved telling secrets to strangers. They were safe there.

“Both my legs are covered in ‘em.”

Hank involuntarily looked. They rested like tinder sticks against the edge of her chair, long and thin and wrapped in torn denim. Black tights filled in the holes.

Flo took a long drag on her cigarette, tilted her head back, and let the smoke rise out of her mouth like an incense offering.

She snapped her jaw closed. “Jellyfish.”

Hank frowned.

“I was twelve and got swarmed on a vacation in Thailand. Looks like I’ve been in a fire. Still feels like it now and again. Nerve damage,” she said, patting her thigh with her free hand.

“Huh. I heard you’re supposed to pee on jellyfish stings.”

She eyed him and pursed her lips. He shrugged and finished his drink.

The night crawled in. He told her about growing up in Santa Madrona, his love of surfing, biking, and pool hustling, and then about his last girlfriend and how she’d left him to become a nutritionist in Santa Cruz. Before long he’d told his complete life story, from being raised by his father after his mother died young to how he dropped out of college to work for his uncle’s construction company. Flo listened. When he finally asked how she came into the housesitting gig, she only mentioned quitting her job and leaving her old life behind.

“Why’d you do that?” he asked.

“Sometimes you gotta say ‘fuck you’ to the world.” All she could see now was his profile outlined by the single street light down the block.

Hank nodded and they sat in silence. After a bit he said, "Like Lykov."

"Who?"

Hank grunted, batted the question away with his hand, and stared back at the road.

"No, no, come on, who's Lykov?"

"Just some story I heard."

"Heard where?"

"Aw, all right, I read it. In *National Geographic*. But don't think I'm some nerd."

"Not an issue," Flo said. She sipped at a new glass.

"Well, he took his whole family out into Siberia before World War II and no one found them until forty years later."

Flo grinned. Hank swatted his hand again. "Ah, what?"

"Go on, go on."

Hank told her the whole story of the persecuted Russian family: their decades of isolation, and their eventual discovery by some geologists, or "rock geeks". The Lykovs didn't even know there'd been another world war, he said. Two of the children had been born out there and had never seen anyone outside of the family before.

Flo drank the last of her champagne.

"And the father only accepted one thing from the scientists," he said. "You know what it was?"

Hank leaned in so no one passing by could hear. Flo leaned toward him.

"Salt," he said, and then he settled back in the deck chair and said nothing more.

Some time later, she sensed him tapping her shoulder, but she was too drunk and tired to speak. He gathered her up in his arms and she let him carry her inside. He set her down on a bed

in the guestroom on the first floor and then she felt him pull off her boots. She heard a door close and then it was morning.

The house sat empty again. Sludging toward the kitchen, she stopped in the living room and stared at the sofa. On a pillow a puddle of saliva formed a dark blue empty word bubble.

Despite her best efforts to stay reclusive, Flo's old friends from college had come knocking and were dragging her out on the weekends. One of them, Nora, set her up on a date insisting it was exactly what Flo needed. One Saturday she found herself staring across a pub table at a man in his early 40s whose chinstrap beard flared like a fish's gills with each peanut he chewed.

"You like any sports?" Chinstrap asked.

"Nope," Flo said, her eyes glued to the basketball game on the television over his head. From across the large room she heard a familiar hooting. Hank stood at the bar with another man and two women. Flo slid off her seat and excused herself to the bathroom. She crossed over to Hank and pulled up a stool next to him.

"Hey! Flo-rence! Florence, uh, what is your last name?"

"Samson."

"Samson! Haven't seen you in awhile, Samson!"

"Please don't call me that," she said, flagging down the bartender.

"All right, all right," he said, bobbing his head. He acted silly enough to be drunk, but Flo noticed that his bottle was root beer. "You here with anyone, Flo?"

“Not really.”

He introduced her to the others. One of the women glared at her. Hank asked if Flo wanted to play some pool.

“Not with your record.”

“C’mon. Friendly game. I promise.” He was already chalking a cue.

Chinstrap materialized next to her.

“Maybe he’ll play you.” She turned to her date. “You any good at pool?”

He shrugged and smirked. Hank accepted this as a formal challenge and the two circled the nearest table. With both distracted, Flo finished her drink and slipped out into the night.

“Your cousin has some pretty dopey friends,” Flo told Nora on the cordless phone the next day. She stood in the threshold of the master bathroom. The tile chilled her toes.

“You’re lonely. I just want to help.”

“I’m not.” She mentioned her new friend.

“Hank Anchors? Hah! He was my brother’s friend in high school.”

“Small town,” she said. She entered the vast, pristine room. Under the sink was a basket of old toiletries where Flo had discovered some Vicodin when she’d made a thorough inventory of the house. She had not used this bathroom since then and avoided going upstairs altogether.

“Good to hear he’s still around. After he hit that school bus while driving drunk, I didn’t really hear much about him.”

“He hit a school bus?”

“It was empty.”

Flo held the bottle up to the light. Ten pills left and only two years expired. “He end up at Bispo?”

“How’d you know?”

“Everyone in Santa Madrona’s been to rehab.”

“Not me,” said Nora.

“Not yet.”

Nora forced a laugh that made Flo cringe. “Say hi to The Hanchorman for me.”

Flo glanced at herself in the mirror. The whites of her eyes peered out from dark caverns. Her legs had been screaming for the past three days and there weren’t enough vitamins, teas, compresses, or herbal remedies in all of Central California to control the fire surrounding her bones.

She stared at the little orange cylinder. Her ashy, chapped knuckles almost trembled. A frozen moment held her there. Then she jerked to life and tossed the pills back under the sink, and they bounced around the pipes, rattling like a snake. She pushed in the door lock, walked back into the bedroom, and closed the door behind her.

Weeks passed. Most evenings Hank came over after work and threw his sweaty body into the deck chair next to her. Sometimes he’d drink too much and he’d call someone. Often it was the woman from the bar, Misty, who would come and wait in her car.

At least once a week Flo and Hank would swap fuck-you stories.

“Hey, I thought of a new one,” he said one night. “Ted Kaczynski.”

“Yeah, but that was in a different way,” Flo said.

She decided there was not much more to say about it. They sat and watched the mountains. She thought about her brushes and paints still in the trunk. Hank scratched under his left suspender. She eyed him. “You keep coming over here. I mean, aren’t you bored with this porch yet?”

Hank laughed. “I don’t know. I spend my weekends biking up in there or surfing over there. I live with two of those jokers,” he pointed at the construction site. “And Misty, well, she never shuts up. I guess with you I get a little bit of quiet. Seems I usually do everything to avoid that. So.”

It was well past noon when Flo surfaced from a dream and realized it was someone leaving a long message on the answering machine and not a board room full of lawyers reading statements at her. She peeled herself off the giant floor rug where she’d ended up the night before.

Flo had groaned when she received the wedding invitation in the mail two months ago, ground her teeth when Nora talked about splitting a hotel room last week, and now she let the house fill with a primal scream after listening to a message from the bride herself. Another figure from her past brought into sharp focus only because she’d wound up back where they’d all met.

Hank was sitting on top of the roof next door eating a sandwich when Flo came around into the side yard. He waved.

“You wanna go to a wedding with me?” she called up to him. She quickly looked down to make sure she was wearing clothes. She was.

“A wedding?” Some of the other workers paused to listen.

“This weekend. I don’t really want to, but looks like I can’t get out of it.”

“Sounds like a fuckin’ blast,” Hank hooted.

“It’s up in Bispo Beach. Swanky country club shit. Free booze and probably some desperate bridesmaids.” She leaned against an orange tree. “You can bring your board.”

“Eh, I’ll think about it,” he said.

She threw up her hands and let them fall to her sides before going back into the house.

His Jeep had a funny noise in the transmission he’d heard on the way over, he explained while loading his board into Flo’s beat-up convertible. He made a motion for the trunk, but she stopped him.

“It’s full. Sorry,” she said.

“Dead body?”

“And a ton of art supplies.”

“You painting again yet?”

She waved the question off and started the car.

Hank put on a few of his favorite songs, hollering the lyrics and dancing in his seat, before Flo insisted on silence. “When you’re driving we can listen to whatever you want.”

“Can I drive?”

“Never.”

He laughed and opened the glove compartment. As he stuffed his music player inside, he

stopped short.

“There a reason you got a gun in here?”

“Oh yeah. Forgot about that.”

“You know, it’s illegal to just have it in your car like that.”

“It was my dad’s. I don’t think it even works, if it makes you feel better.”

Hank closed the latch. “You know how to shoot?”

“Nope. You?”

He nodded and told her about the hunting expeditions his father had taken him on as a kid, how he’d enjoyed just about everything except the actual act. “Especially the birds. I mean, they’re just these little creatures,” he said, cupping his hands together.

“My dad hunted, but he only took my brother.”

“Where’s your brother now?”

“Somewhere in Idaho living off the land or something.”

“So he’s said ‘fuck you’, too, huh?”

Flo nodded and stared at the road ahead.

After an enormous dinner and seven toasts to the bride and groom, Flo and Hank’s table peeled off pair by pair to go dance until it was just the two of them and some women Flo had done her best to ignore all night. One of them was a blonde named Renee, an Intermedia Arts major who’d done an installation in the university library foyer that Flo had badmouthed ten years ago.

“So tell me, Florence, why did you leave your cushy teaching gig?”

Flo tried not to scowl. Who had even told her anything? Santa Madrona compressed

down to fit on the head of a pin. She ran her fingertips hard along her left thigh through her pants. It felt like it was about to burst into flame.

“Because I heard some interesting rumors.”

“I don’t really –”

“I heard,” Renee cut her off, finishing her drink and leaning in with a conspiring smile, “that you had a secret liaison with one of your students.”

“Hm. I like that,” Flo said. “We’ll go with that.” Hank snickered.

Renee was waiting for more. Flo wanted to say that Renee seemed incapable of facial expressions due to her Botox treatments, but she just grimaced.

“Always so cold, Florence,” Renee said. “You know, I also heard you’d relapsed and bought pills from students.”

Flo forced herself to shrug. Renee looked out the window over Flo’s shoulder to the dark outline of buildings near the water.

“Speaking of which,” she trilled, “isn’t that where you went to rehab?”

Flo flexed her hands under the table. She stood, walked over to the bar, hoisted up a bottle, and went out onto the balcony.

“I was over there, too,” Hank said, leaning on the railing beside her.

“I know,” Flo burped. “And believe me, the guilt I feel for continuing to drink with you after I found out is –”

“Nah, it was for cocaine.”

“What?” Flo turned to squint at him. “But the accident –”

“Yeah, that was from drinking. But I know my limits now as far as operating heavy

machinery goes.”

“I’m still a piece of shit, though, no getting around that.”

Hank stared out at the golf course below. “Well, you can either be a piece of shit or you can say ‘fuck you’.”

Flo blinked. The horizon wobbled.

“Let’s get out of here,” Hank said, clapping his hand on her back. She belched.

Inside, the lights spun and undulated. They made it halfway across the ballroom when Renee appeared at her side and opened her mouth.

Flo stopped and held up her fingers to Renee’s lips. People paused in their conversations to watch. Renee pushed her hand away. “You don’t have to be so nasty, Florence.”

Flo swung her head back in disgust. Then she pointed her finger and leaned in.

“You’re full of shit, Renee. Just like you always were.”

More people turned to watch.

Renee squinted. “And you’re just a washed-up junky.”

Flo watched as Renee tried to sneer. Flo started to bark with laughter, the entire room and everyone in it suddenly marvelously absurd, and then she vomited onto Renee’s pink silk shoes.

“I think she’s still screaming,” Hank cackled as they careened across the golf course. They had to pause twice for Flo to retch again, announcing her anger to the short, clean grass.

They made it to the coastal highway and scampered the half mile back to the motel. When they arrived, Hank pulled Flo past the building to the beach where they stumbled and righted themselves several times in the sand before reaching the water.

She stopped short when a wave slipped over her shoes.

Flo watched as Hank tore off his jacket and dress shirt before whipping off his pants. Then he took off running into the ocean, thrusting his knees high into the air. He gave a great whoop! and then plunged head-first into a wave.

A sudden panic seized her guts when he didn't immediately surface. The sea was as black as the sky with only a sliver of a moon to catch the foam on the surf. She took a few steps forward and called his name. Her voice disappeared over the waves. Then she saw his hand waving from some short distance out. He shouted for her to come join him, that the water's warm, that she shouldn't be afraid.

Flo shook her head. He jumped into another wave and rode it back toward her. He stood where the water reached his waist and held out his hand.

"It's OK. There aren't any jellyfish here."

He waited. She crossed her arms.

"If one stings you, I'll pee on it," he said.

She hiccupped a laugh. He walked up to her in his dripping boxers, and she gave him her hand. She slipped off her shoes and he led her into the sea. When the water reached her knees, she said it was far enough. Hank sat down beside her legs and let the eager waves break against his chest. She stared out at the slim angle of incidence the moon cast. Her fingertips smoothed his hair back into place, and when she brought them to her lips she could taste nothing but salt over any bile remaining.

Flo emerged from the bathroom in her pajamas and found Hank lying on the bed in nothing but a new pair of boxers. His bird tattoo sprawled farther down his chest than she'd seen

when she first met him.

“You wear clothes to bed?” he said.

“Only on Saturdays.”

He laughed.

“You know something? You’re the first person I’ve told about the jellyfish since my ex-husband.”

Hank looked at her legs. “Do they hurt right now?”

She nodded. “But not on the surface.”

“Can I see them?”

She considered this. No one had seen them for a long time. Her ex-husband had treated them with indifference but others had been visibly disturbed.

“Only if you turn the lights off,” she said in a voice so low she herself almost missed it. She climbed onto the bed as Hank turned and switched off the lamp.

She took a deep breath, untied the drawstring on her pants, and shuffled them to her ankles. She felt Hank pull them off and set them aside as she leaned back on her elbows. Her eyes adjusted to the shadows and shades of blue in the room.

Flo could hear his breath as he reached out and touched a ropey ridge that ran from her ankle to her knee. She froze at the sensation as he traced the line up to her kneecap. He pushed up her nightshirt to continue up her thigh. His touch was deliberate. She could make out his profile, and his mouth was parted slightly. Flo realized she was holding her breath. She closed her eyes and eased back onto the bed. He continued tracing the rumpled edges of her overlapping scars, recording each fjord and valley. He lifted and turned her legs to be thorough, and his methodical mapping continued until every square inch of her marbleized flesh had come under

his touch.

Then she felt something larger settle between her middle thighs and she peered over her chest to find Hank face down, his eyes pressed against her skin, his breath blowing hot between her knees. She waited. After a long time, he eased to one side and rested a hand on her calf. She heard the deep breaths of sleep overtake him. Outside, the sea tore open and mended itself again and again until it fused with her dreams.

On the way home they didn't say much. When they reached Cheri's house, Flo helped Hank move his things back to his car. She stood on the sidewalk and squinted in the sun at him.

"Cheri's coming back in a few weeks," she said.

"You gonna stick around?"

She shook her head. "There's a job back in Chicago. My mother," she said, dismissing the air with her hand, "she knows some people at a museum where they have classes for kids."

Hank stared at the garden beyond her and she at the mountains beyond him.

"This place isn't for me, Hank."

He looked at her and said, "Hey, there's this weird-ass biker bar up in the mountains where they grill killer tri-tip on Saturdays, but no one's ever up for the drive. You want a goodbye dinner next week?"

She agreed. Then she wanted nothing more than to take him in her arms and hold on, hold on all day, hold on all through the evening. But she stood motionless on the curb as he tipped his chin, climbed into his car, and drove away with the point of his surfboard cutting the air like a lopsided fin, or a wing banking on the air current.

“Wow, it’s packed,” Flo said as she drove by the front parking lot of the restaurant. Rows of shiny motorcycles dominated the front end and a few people milled about checking them out. Hank guided her to an extra lot some distance down the road.

Once inside, they sat on a booth in the entryway and waited for a table.

“How’s the new job site?” she asked.

“Lame. Takes an hour just to get there from my place.” He glanced over at her. “And there’s no one next door to chill out with.”

She smiled and let her left leg relax enough to touch his. She felt his do the same.

“There’s something I want to show you, but only after the sun’s set,” he said. He gestured to some pool tables. “But first –”

“Really?”

“Just one,” he said, smiling.

During dinner, as the windows became frames for the vivid sunset, Flo found herself laughing more than eating. For the first time in years, her stomach muscles ached in that welcome way. She imagined buying a motorcycle and riding with Hank along these mountain roads.

Hank smiled and excused himself. As Flo walked to the bathroom, she saw him already in a pool game with an enormous man in a black t-shirt. His left arm bore a tattoo of a hawk surrounded by some designs well-faded with age.

She reconsidered her upcoming departure for the hundredth time in front of the huge bathroom mirror. She touched her cheeks; they had started to fill in again.

When she came back out, different people occupied the pool table. From behind her she felt a hand grab at her arm and she spun around to see Hank.

“Let’s go!” he hissed.

She started to speak, but he was already hurrying through the side door into the parking lot. She followed him into the night. When she looked back, she saw three men coming their way. Flo spotted a pool cue in a hand.

They hurried through the woods together in the darkness toward the single street light illuminating the auxiliary parking lot. They stumbled into the clearing and Flo fumbled with her keys. She heard Hank behind her say, “Come on guys. Fair’s fair.”

She turned around to see a scrawny guy step up to Hank. He said, “Ain’t nothing fair about what you tried to pull. Hand it over.”

“Hank, do it,” Flo said. She pushed the key into the lock.

“Fuck you,” Hank spat at the men. “Buncha sore losers.” He turned to the car and Flo saw the man up front pull out a knife. She yelped. Hank turned back to see the man start to come forward. Hank stepped to the side and landed a right hook on the guy’s ear, sending him straight to the ground. Hank spun around in time to punch a second man in the gut, but the guy was so thick he didn’t flinch. Instead, he grabbed Hank’s arm and wrestled him down.

Flo dove across the front seat of her car and found herself holding her father’s revolver. She looked and saw that Hank had managed to pin his assailant. As she opened the passenger door she saw the third man come up behind them. The man swung the pool cue like a baseball bat straight into Hank’s temple. He dropped like a sack of wet cement, and the man raised the

cue again and aimed.

“Hey!” Flo shouted. The bikers looked over and she pointed the gun at them. She was still horizontal and hanging out of the car door.

The man with the cue backed away slowly and then took off running. The man underneath Hank rolled him off and held her gaze as he gathered himself up into a crouch. He reached for Hank’s wallet and Flo pointed the gun into the air and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened.

“Now, come on, lady,” he said, turning toward her. “We was just having an argument. I’m gonna take back my money and then I think me and him are square.”

Flo twisted herself into more of a sitting position and kept the gun pointed at him. The first man with the knife groaned from beneath a tree and then eased to his feet.

“You get the fuck away from us,” Flo hissed, more angry than scared. The man closest to her took another step and Flo trembled with rage. She pointed the gun at his feet and fired.

This time there was a round in the chamber.

The forest absorbed the blast as the man’s boot absorbed the bullet. Flo and the man both screamed. Then he swore and stumbled off into the trees. The man with the knife had already disappeared.

Dust swirled in the orange light as Hank moaned on the ground. Flo tossed the revolver into the backseat and scrambled out the door to him. Blood pooled under his head in the dirt.

Her headlights cut through the mountain darkness, bobbing and bouncing about with each bump and turn. Hank pressed a car chamois to his wound and leaned against the window.

“No,” said Flo. She reached over and shook his shoulder. “You can’t fall asleep.”

“I won’t,” Hank mumbled, closing his eyes.

“Eyes on the road!” Flo snapped. Hank winced. She squeezed his knee and then slapped it a few times. “Hey. Hey! Talk, man. Tell me, uh, tell me what you were going to show me after dinner.”

“Oh yeah. There’s this really high footbridge over a valley. After dark you can see the Milky Way and everything else.”

“I haven’t seen that in years,” she said. “We’ll go back sometime, OK?”

Hank didn’t respond.

“Hey! You gotta keep talking. How about a fuck-you story?”

“Don’t have any new ones,” he said.

“Then tell me an old one. The Russians. Tell me about them again.”

Flo took a hard right and Hank leaned into her. He coughed and repositioned the chamois. It was already half-soaked in blood.

“Lykov. He hated the government.”

“Yeah, yeah. Tell me about the family.”

“I don’t know much more.”

“Think, man!”

He watched the road for a few moments and then said, “Yeah, so the mother died of starvation just as the winter ended. She’d given everything for her kids and then she died. That spring Lykov goes into the garden and finds this single, uh, thing of wheat coming out of the ground.”

“Hey, that’s new.”

“Good.” He turned toward the window again. “So there’s just this one thing of wheat. Or rye. Or something. But just one. And because they’re still on the edge of starving like the mom did, the kids and the dad take turns for weeks staying up all night guarding this thing so no mice or whatever eat the seeds. They get a few dozen off of it and then they rebuild their crop that way. From that one little thing of grain.”

Hank stared up at the stars.

“Keep going,” Flo said. “Twenty minutes before we get to the hospital.”

“I don’t know anymore.”

“Sure you do.”

But he had slipped into silence again.

Flo glanced at him constantly, but his eyes remained open and fixed on the moon. The headlights illuminated the treetops and craggy boulders lining the road. Above them loomed the inverted canyon of the night sky.

“It’s so clear up here,” he said at last.

On the morning of her departure, Flo and Hank had lunch by the main beach. He had new stitches overlapping his old scar. He walked her out to her car.

“All packed, huh?” he said, and gave her rear tire a kick.

She nodded. It would be a long drive to where some semblance of a stable life waited for her. She felt her guts churn as Hank looked at her and then back to the pavement.

“Hey, let’s take a walk down by the water,” she said.

A weekly art fair lined the main pathway along the beach where dozens of local artists displayed their wares in the mild sunlight and sea breeze. It featured mainly crafty things, handmade hemp dresses and clay pots, but Flo and Hank wandered into the fine arts section where a few serious painters sat on stools reading or drawing in front of their work.

Flo studied a piece in detail and then looked up to find Hank had vanished. She darted from booth to booth, seized with a panic that he'd left without saying goodbye. She nearly knocked him over when she found him standing in front of a painting. It centered on a laughing woman in a bright orange dress with an enormous Hyacinth macaw perched on her shoulder. It was garish, goofy, even obnoxious in its bold colors and thick lines.

She was about to say so when Hank turned to her.

“She looks like you.”