

## **The Getaway**

by Michelle Cacho-Negrete

### The Getaway – Part One

When my mother left my stepfather, she travelled 3,000 miles away to California—a trip made mythic by distance, by time, by intimacy with yet another stranger in our lives, a woman named Beattie. Children, my brother and I were swept away with her on this seemingly mythical journey. Fleeing seemed a central theme in our lives, perhaps a vestigial gene not weeded out by the passage of time, elegant in its continuing usefulness for flight from pre-historic saber-toothed tigers to the more recent pogroms in Russia and Concentration Camps in Eastern Europe, culminating in flight from a bad marriage. Limited funds had previously made for limited destinations: Mystic Connecticut, Freehold New Jersey, anywhere Long Island. We had become accustomed to arrivals in such destinations culminating in same-day departures to return home, but this getaway was different, New York would be left too far behind for a day trip.

Perhaps that vestigial gene for flight originated in our mother in her Jewish childhood, which reached a crescendo in a dark-of-the-night flight from Russia, where caution and mistrust paradoxically mingled with the need to rely on strangers. Indeed, caution and mistrust were the lingering residue of our mother's childhood, so much so that sometimes my mother seemed a stranger, a woman who, aside from everyday dealings, shared little. It may be small wonder that she became a woman who would confuse secrecy with staying alive. Yet despite her mistrust, the need to rely on strangers remained a part of her core nature too, and our lives were filled with strangers embraced by my mother as old friends

like Beattie. Perhaps they were; my mother regarded her past as her own business exempt from even the simple question of where and when she met her friends. These long fingers of mistrust, secrecy, flight were all part of the mother I understood so poorly. Looking back, my vision of her is as confusing and cluttered as the swiftness of our relocation to California.

My memories of the getaway are suspect, as are all memories of the long ago; an uncertainty about days and nights and weeks and events. I was nine, my brother four. This trip harbors the essence of something fragile and broken, my mother piling things into a few cartons, my hurried packing of books into a shopping bag, bouncing it down the tenement stoop to a waiting car that would transport us somewhere my mother proclaimed golden: California.

"California," my mother repeated with a strange reverence. She hurried us from our apartment to the street as though any delay would make us late. "Movie stars, sunshine, opportunities. Our lives will be different, better, golden." Her face was haggard with determination, eyes bloodied with a messianic mission, her voice capturing the timbre of a revivalist. Although a child I understood that she was deeply wounded and desperate.

"Into the car," she ordered while we stared at the large stranger in the front seat, perspiring in the punishing August heat.

"This is Beattie, an old friend," she said, noticing our hesitation.

Beattie turned to acknowledge us then faced forward and stared out the windshield, the set of her shoulders rigid and unyielding, the heaviness of her hands on the steering wheel suggesting her body had rusted into this position. It seemed likely I'd never see her after this trip, that her time as our old friend would be brief, rushing by like the road and time itself, but just then she was the most important person in my mother's life. It was nothing new; all we ever expected were strangers spinning through the revolving door of my mother's welcomes and dismissals, her love and her fury. We knew better than to become attached.

It was hot the way New York is hot; unrelenting, invasive, smothering as if to demand attention. I wore shorts, sandals, a halter, a cling of clothes with

unraveling hems that trailed threads down my damp skin. My brother wore shorts and a faded tee-shirt with a superman so indistinct it appeared he'd given up. My four-foot, ten-inch mother wore red shorts that she believed made her legs look longer, red lipstick, gold hoops.

She was impatient with our hesitation, pushed us into the back seat, slammed the door, loaded cartons into the trunk while Beattie looked straight ahead as though unaware of the commotion. The vinyl seat sizzled beneath me, a searing indictment of the New York summer. I pressed my bag of books to my chest. My brother was silent, his eyes half-closed as if to veil out the future.

My mother slid into the front seat, slammed the car door and mumbled under her breath, "Let's go, go, go."

As if in response, the car growled and shot forward in little spurts until achieving a smooth momentum.

"We're going to my old friends in California to decide if we want to live there," my mother told us, but we weren't listening. As the car left our street behind, I began to dread what would come next; my mother's face, her voice, the way she lit up the cigarette, shook the match out like a cat shaking a captured mouse, and Beattie silent beside her. My brother, who never napped, slept. I already had a book in my hand.

"Your father knows this leaving is a test," my mother said. "If he can stop gambling, can come home nights, maybe we'll come home too."

But I saw in her eyes, her bags always packed in front of one door or another, that home was just some abstraction.

We crossed the Williamsburg Bridge. Above us the elevated train shook the beams and rattled a lullaby of regret. The Lower East Side opened like a book in front of us: cheap clothing fronting discount stores, kosher restaurants, a spill of people that, like us, were going somewhere in a hurry. The car was drenched in New York, opened windows inviting it in. We were drowning in noise, loud voices, the ubiquitous sirens of fire engines, police cars, ambulances, honking demands of buses and cars, zoom of a plane overhead, the vanishing roar of the train. The car reeked with the scent of Delancey Street, that specific

staleness composed of car exhaust, sour pickles, sweat, bread and something peculiar to this car, the scent of madness coming from the front seat, from these two fleeing women, although what Beattie was fleeing from I never learned.

Like stars of a Western movie, we four were fugitives.

### The Escape Route

The City vanished behind us. Large maps were unfolded: red and blue and green and yellow dotted lines and straight lines, route numbers, names of bridges and bodies of water and cities and towns and states all reeling across the map in my mother's hand. She had a cigarette in her mouth, eyes squinting against the smoke, her short auburn hair darkened with perspiration. She examined the map, following lines with the tip of her finger, making decisions. "Beattie can't read a map," she confided.

We crawled along the Garden State Parkway, an indication of what America was becoming: warehouses, factories, polluted bodies of water, too many cars, truck-stop diners whose signs offered bathrooms and lunch specials. The air was a shroud of greasy black. The women conferred softly. I heard my mother's voice, but not Beattie's; it was as if she spoke below the range of human hearing. Sweat poured off them.

This was a getaway that seemed to take forever but is barely memorable in its monotony. There was a hotel room with two beds. My mother slept with my brother. I slept with Beattie. Her body swallowed the bed. She was dripping wet. She was loud: tossing, snoring, bleating. I crossed over in the dark of night to lie beside my brother. I took up as little room as possible. My mother's eyes opened in the dark, silently noting me with the concentration of a wild animal.

"This is Akron, Ohio," my mother said as we passed some city line. She inhaled deeply on her cigarette. "When we got off the boat after my parents fled the Old Country and came here, it took two buses, I don't know why. We stayed at a house with other Jews. That first morning we woke up, there was a cross

burning outside our window and men in white sheets like ghosts. '*Mein Gott*' my mother said to my father. 'We need to go to New York.' We packed our few belongings and fled again like gypsies."

Beattie hummed. My mother smoked. I looked out the window for men in sheets and burning crosses but saw only ordinary-looking people crossing the street. I went back to my book.

We three were in a hotel room somewhere outside St. Louis, Beattie in one of her own. Bugs sizzled on the light bulbs like widows who immolate themselves on funeral pyres; the helpless trapped by the inescapable. The tub was ringed with black. Hair clogged the drain. We were beside a highway, loud music from passing cars a broken conversation. Beams of fleeting light slashed our faces and the stained walls like spotlights in a prison.

We woke to coffee, toast, milk and cold cereal. Beattie and my mother examined maps growing ragged, creases ripping apart, edges stained with sweat. Cigarette smoke circled my mother's head like a curving road to nowhere.

"Back in the car," she ordered, crushing her cigarette in coffee dregs.

Then Kansas.

"Look," my mother said, leaning over the seat to shake my arm. "Look out the window. Kansas, like in the Wizard of Oz."

I put down my book and looked out the window. Ahead of us the blacktop ran into a lowered sky. We were all alone in an unwinding frame of flat green without feature or distinction, a tedious stretch of sameness without the character of tenements or skyscrapers to enliven it. The sky overhead was equally flat, a stale blue and, monotonous in the absence of clouds.

My brother and I lost ourselves in books though sometimes he slept. My mother smoked and charted the miles and the hours, the distance between morning and evening and New York and California; we fled west, contemporary pioneers in search of something better.

"Cowboys," my mother yelled. She had taken the long way to see Texas. It added time, but this was her road trip, her chance to see America.

My brother and I stared. Men in boots and cowboy hats filled the streets; no horses, guitars, Gene Autry or Roy Rogers singing songs about the range.

“Cowboys,” my mother said more quietly at our lack of enthusiasm. My brother and I smiled at her, feeling we owed her that.

New Mexico was a flood of stars in the darkest night I’d ever witnessed. The car light was on, the windows shut tight.

“We have a full tank,” my mother told Beattie. “We’ll find our way out of the desert in the morning, but at least we’re on a highway going somewhere.”

My brother and I wanted to pee outside, to see the stars without a glass barrier. My mother shook her head. “There are coyotes, rattlesnakes, who knows what else.” These were city women, the desert a page in the encyclopedia.

Outside the windows was the first magical thing I’d seen this trip: a moon dwarfing the one above the tenements, stars that arched to split the skin of sky, a silence too vast to comprehend. I opened the door and my brother and I leaped out, met by a rush of air dense with mesquite and sage, names I would learn years later with my second husband. We heard the howl of animals rejoicing in the glorious night, the perfumed air, the moon-drenched, eerie rock monuments that burst from the desert floor in a deep exhaled breath.

“Listen to that,” my mother screamed as her door flew open. She pulled us back inside. “That’s coyotes and you’re their dinner. You see a coyote, you run!”

The next morning her eyes were black with sleeplessness. She examined the map, twisting it this way and that as though it was a compass, then pointed the way forward.

## The Arrival

California was dry and brown, the air a vibrating whine of wires and traffic and earth-moving machinery. Beattie deposited us and our cartons outside a low-roofed home on a block bustling with cars and vanished without a good-bye. She was replaced by two new old friends I’ll call Jane and Jim. They stepped outside

to greet us, the open front door an invitation. My mother and Jane hugged, the tentative embrace of women who haven't seen each other for a long time.

My mother shuffled us forward; "My children."

We were examined, our sweat-soaked clothes, our exhaustion, our shyness, as though we were exotic; humanoid, but not quite human. Jane sighed disappointedly. Jim nodded. My brother and I looked at them silently. He was big, broad-boned, balding and going to fat, his smile Cheshire Cat wide and toothy. She was small and fast-moving with sharp features, a fluttering bird evidencing a low-level distress.

"Your mother and I, we grew up together, on the Lower East side," Jane said. The face she turned to my mother was sly, secretive.

My mother nodded, then a shift in their bodies, their eyes meeting briefly, a turning away from the sun-soaked day suggested sadness, resignation, an inability to come to terms with something.

The three adults each lifted a carton. My brother and I following them through the open door.

"The house is beautiful," my mother said, putting her carton down.

The house was white, white like a hospital room, white like the sheets on the men in Akron of my mom's memory, white like an avalanche burying us. I was assaulted by white, doors, furniture, rugs, only the windows distinct, big square cut-outs ushering in blinding light. We stood revealed and waiting for what would come next. I knew we had crossed some sharply delineated border, the world outside, the world inside.

"Take off your shoes and leave them outside," Jane commanded us.

We did, immediately.

"The white rug gets stained very easily," she warned. "We are very careful."

I knew for certain then what I'd suspected, there were no children in this house.

"My kids are really careful," my mother said.

“Now,” my mother said, turning to us and kneeling. “Tomorrow morning, early, I am going to leave you here in this beautiful house with Jim and Jane for a little while and go home to deal with Daddy to decide what we are going to do. Beattie will drive me. I'll miss you, but it won't be long.”

I looked at her, but fleeing had taken over, I saw it in her eyes. We'd come all this way just for her to run somewhere else—Brooklyn, California, anywhere, just a destination to leave from, the real destination motion itself.

“Do what Jane tells you, behave yourselves. I'll be back before school starts,” she said. “You're going to have fun here.”

I thought of barely-remembered stranger-friends who had come and gone, people whose vanishing had left behind no huge hole in her life; they were there and then they weren't.

“Take us home with you,” I pleaded. My fingers clenched white around the handle of my book-filled shopping bag. Like an animal I'd caught the scent of danger. I grabbed her hand. “We'll be quiet, we'll be good, we'll stay in our rooms.”

She shook her head and cupping my hands around her face I leaned forward to whisper, “Don't leave us here.”

“I'll call you every Saturday,” she promised as though she hadn't heard the pleading in my voice and hadn't smelled the danger apparent to me.

“I'll be back so soon it will be like I never left.”

My brother put his thumb in his mouth.

“He still sucks his thumb?” Jane said. “We'll break him of that soon enough.”

It seemed a warning my mother appeared to have missed, but then, when you're on the run you ignore things that might slow you up.

My mother stood and faced her. “No, he doesn't really suck his thumb, only when meeting strangers.”

I wanted to say, no, he sucks his thumb when he's scared, but remained absolutely silent, practicing how to vanish.

“What's in the bag?” Jane asked, turning to me.



“Her books,” my mother answered.

“I see,” she said. “We’ll have to get a look at them.”

“They’re just her books,” my mother said.

The three adults stared at the bag then lit cigarettes, contributing to a swamp of humid, eye-stinging, low-lying smoke. Every Bakelite-white table owned a pack of cigarettes, a cigarette lighter, and an ashtray. Every painted-white room was dingy with smoke that had no escape hatch. Every meal my brother and I would eat in the white-tiled kitchen would taste like tobacco.

My mother would sleep on the couch that night, making for an easy departure. My brother and I were ushered into a white bedroom with twin beds and end tables with white-shaded lamps. The gauzy curtains were white. So were the blankets. So were the sheets and pillowcases. I was afraid to lie down on so much white even after I had taken a shower. The grown-ups spoke quietly in the living room, my mother’s indistinguishable words a hum of abandonment. The next morning, she was gone, the white couch immaculate with her absence. I rested my head in the outline of hers on the pillow; she was now somewhere in the outside world that was fading into white for us.

Jane, over breakfast, looked at my brother’s picture books and deemed them acceptable, then pulled all of mine from the shopping bag and placed them on the kitchen table.

“These are science fiction.” she shook her head sorrowfully. “Your mother lets you read this garbage? This stuff will rot your brain. It’s no better than comic books. You can’t read this in my house.”

She shoved them back in the bag. “I’ll get you books from the library.”

She dumped them into a trash bag that she closed tightly, placed it out the side door, then opened a sliding glass door to her yard, pushed us outside, closed it.

The door was a portal between safety and danger.

My brother grabbed my hand and put his thumb in his mouth. The sun was blinding. There were two trees in the yard and only a ball to play with. We were boxed in by tall hedges. We looked around in silence then finally played tag; I

chased my brother around the yard then he chased me. We played ball for a few minutes. There were suddenly sharp stinging flashes through our legs, an assault, specks of red like the tips of lit matches marring our legs, we screamed, ran to the door, banged on it. Jane came to the door, serenely watched us crying, then opened it.

"Fire ants," she said complacently. She brushed them off with a cloth that appeared out of nowhere, took us inside, put our legs in cold water in the bathtub, put mecuricome on a Q-Tip, and dabbed the swelling, red blotches.

"Go outside again and play," she said as she ushered out the door. "Watch out for fire ants."

We stepped out cautiously, then ran to the bigger of two trees. I pulled my brother up beside me. We looked out at the street and I planned our getaway. I'd fled before: from a street-gang, from a sarcastic teacher, from our mother's anger, but never with such a feeling of desperation and with the growing knowledge that this tree might be as far as we could actually flee. We stayed in the tree until Jane called us in for lunch. While we were outside, she'd gone to the library, returning with bland books on the level of a first grader. Both of us were beyond that. Nevertheless, I read them to my brother in the tree until mid-afternoon when we were allowed to come in, shower, then sit on the white couch and watch television until dinner.

"Have a nice first day?" Jim asked over a dish of spaghetti.

We looked at Jane and nodded silently.

I couldn't sleep that night. I listened to my brother's muted breathing, his tossing and turning, the whoosh of thumb sucking, then stealthily made my way through the kitchen, opened the back door and, miraculously, my bag of books was still there. Despite the hum of the air conditioner, I was afraid dragging the bag would make too much noise. I reached into it, carried a few books at a time into the closet in our bedroom. Over the next few days, I smuggled them into the yard, and wedged them in the hedges. By the time we left, the pages were rotting, words faded, spines broken and sad, but they had sustained us. I filled the bag with crumpled newspaper and hoped for the best; my audacity paid off.

Jane threw the garbage bag on the sidewalk beside her trash bags next morning and it vanished into the teeth of the dump truck.

Over the next week, although sometimes we stayed quietly in our room, we were happiest outside where we had the illusion of freedom. We climbed the tree where I read aloud. The world had been divided into threes: the normal world, seen in glimpses from the top of the tree or on television with its perfect families and safe streets which could be watched but not entered. There was the grass, a green slash of color, deceptively innocent, a mine field from tree to house, crossed as swiftly and carefully as possible. Then there was the house and Jane, the most dangerous place we'd ever been.

The grass was the neutral zone between the other two, though it had its own pleasures and its own dangers. One afternoon we did experience a temporary halt in the danger. Jim put out a water sprinkler on the grass after leaving work early and we ran through, water instantaneously drying on our skin in the blazing heat. More often it was merely a place to be crossed. We weren't always successful in avoiding fire ants during our run across the lawn. That second time I brushed them off us as quickly as possible, opened the door and we slipped inside then stood without moving away from it.

Jane came running in from her bedroom at the sound of the door closing. "Are you stupid?" she said exasperated. "You'd better learn because I'm not going to put up with this."

We silently followed her to the bathroom and sat on the edge of the tub. As she applied mecuricome to my brother's leg it jerked nervously, hit her hand and the bottle tipping, a thin red stream marking the white tiled floor like blood. Her face was expressionless as she looked from him to that thin red flow and then, without warning, she slapped him across the face with such force his head reeled backward against the wall. He shrieked in pain.

"Silence," she hissed and leaned up close to him. "I warned you about being careful! Silence. How else will you learn your lesson." She shook her head sadly.

This was the first of many lessons.

He was slapped every time she saw him suck his thumb, said he missed my mother, or asked for a glass of water. He learned to be always silent.

He began to wet the bed and was slapped for each wet sheet, sometimes placed in a closet because the slapping wasn't working.

He woke up with a nightmare and was slapped for waking everyone else. I began to share his bed, sleeplessly aware of his restlessness, prepared to wake him at any sound he made. All this before the first week had ended.

And then there was me—my lessons.

Jane smoked silently at the table watching us eat lunch: a grilled cheese sandwich, pickle, glass of water, a raw carrot. We ate quickly, eager to flee to the ant-infested safety of the yard and up the tree and into the imaginary worlds that kept us sane.

In my haste I dropped my glass of water and it rolled slowly across the table, water pooling, dripping in a slow liquid fall to the floor. Jane watched it roll without comment, then carefully put her cigarette in the ashtray, stood, walked around the table. I looked out the window, listened to her breathing, held my breath. She grasped my hair then and yanked my head back forcefully. My teeth rammed together, my vision lost in a screen of white. I screamed in astonishment and pain.

“Silence,” she said and smiled tightly. “Remember to be careful.”

I did.

By the end of the second week, the amount of times we had not “been careful” ran into each other; one long interval during which more and more things to be careful about appeared. I developed a constant headache from my hair being pulled. Jane slapped my brother in places not easily viewed. I grew more and more distant from everything, diminishing in size like Alice after drinking the bottle she found down the rabbit hole. We seemed to lose form and substance, ghostly indistinct presences that only assumed corporeality in the tree. It seemed to me that I couldn't always see my brother, although we were always together.

Of note; we were never “taught lessons” after Jim came home from work. Now, as an adult, I can't imagine that he didn't know what was going on and feel

that never addressing the subject with him probably saved us from much worse. However, we were never hungry; there was always as much food as we wanted, although our appetites shrunk in proportion of the amount of weeks we remained there.

Time was so fluid, so without meaning, that it seemed years until my mother's first phone call, only ten days after she left. Jane cornered us in the kitchen. "Don't tell your mother about your lessons," she said. "It's a surprise for her. She'll be very grateful to get such well-behaved children back."

Her eyes glittered with menace and something more, something I didn't understand then, but would remember thirty-five years later when I ran batterer education groups in Maine for violent men on probation.

We nodded. We were ... silent.

My mother called every Saturday after that. Jane stood over us listening to our conversation. Despite what was happening to us, my mother's call was comforting. We had not become stranger-friends, we had remained her children.. Every Saturday we told our mother we were having fun. Every Saturday Jane told her all the fun things we had done.

"Move here," she insisted. "I can watch them while you get a job."

Some nights, lying in bed beside my brother, I wondered how my mother knew Jane, how she could know so little about her, how much she actually missed us. I gave her, and still give her, the benefit of the doubt. She was desperate, but she was not cruel.

The weeks melted into each other like one continuous day, nothing golden, the pain constant enough to be commonplace, until the last week, when my mother told us she was giving my stepfather a second chance.

"I bought plane tickets for the two of you to fly home. Won't it be fun," she said excitedly. "Your first time on an airplane and all by yourselves."

Jane argued with her over the telephone. She'd warned us to insist on staying, to say we loved California, loved her, didn't want to go back to New York.

We hesitantly said what she demanded we say.

My mother heard something in our voices, a trembling plea that refuted our words.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

I was silent.

“You’ll be home in two days,” she said.

### The Souvenir

I hung up and felt as though I was waking from a dream and trickling back into myself. It was hard, scary, but time to grow solid. I began to see my brother in his corporeality rather than some vague shape. Relief asserted itself with the cool pleasure of water. We hugged and despite Jane watching us, her mouth tight with anger, spun in a circle. Jim stood beside her smiling and we felt safe. We would be gone before he returned to work on Monday.

We all went out into the yard and for the first time a butterfly lit on my arm. I stood motionless holding my breath, my brother and I watching its black-tipped wings slowly open and close like a book. Suddenly, Jim grabbed the butterfly by its wings, its body twisting in an effort to escape.

“Isn’t it beautiful,” he said.

We nodded.

“Want to take it home,” he asked. “A souvenir of your time in California?”

I didn't want a souvenir. I wanted to forget my time in California, but I had an image then of it drifting, from flower to flower on my mother's fire escape garden, an emblem of freedom.

I nodded.

“Follow me,” he said.

Jim had a small workshop, filled with neatly-lined shelves of tools, nails, a small table and chair. He pulled a jar from his shelf and beckoned us to come closer. He held the butterfly carefully up, pulled a long thick needle from the jar, then quickly inserted it into the butterfly’s head and slowly pushed it down through the body which twisted in horrendous convulsion. At that moment, every

punishment, every moment, every fear vanished in a wash of terror so profound that my vision faded. Bile rose to my throat, and I dropped to the floor.

I didn't know it then, but this moment of observing pain inflicted on something so helpless and beautiful would haunt my nightmares, offer me deepening insight into our month in California, into the casual, thoughtless quality that could be part of cruelty, into each client I worked with as a psychotherapist thirty years later. It remained one of the seminal moments of my life, and when so much else faded, the memory remains in such stunning detail, that each time I remember it, I am once again that child.

We left the butterfly there.

### The Getaway – Last Chapter

We took home only the clothes on our backs, everything else having vanished overnight and the hidden books deliquescing in the hedges. Jane was silent, her fury manifested by her welcomed decision to ignore us. Jim, as he drove to the airport, was talkative. He warned us about our ears clogging, gave us chewing gum, told us that stewardesses would give us soda and sandwiches and watch out for us. He told us to visit again soon, that he was sorry we weren't going to school in California, and that he was surprised we didn't take the butterfly.

At the airport, Jane wandered off. Jim leaned over to kiss us good-bye, looked around for her, said, "I thought she'd want a last good-by kiss," then nodded to the stewardess who took each of our hands. We turned our backs and didn't look back. We clung to this woman who helped us flee up metal stairs, through a door and belted us into the first row. She sat beside another stewardess and both winked at us as the engines begin to roar. We rolled down the tarmac, a lengthening scroll of departure. The propellers turned. At that moment, I swore to myself that when I grew up and had children, I would never leave them with anyone I didn't know intimately and had daily contact with, a vow

I've kept. With a stomach wrenching burst of power, the plane slanted up higher and higher into safety. California fell beneath us, a shawl of green, brown, gold, a long blue splash of ocean, snow-capped mountains, then an unexpected tunnel of white as we flew into a cloud.

When we were through it, California had vanished.



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