bioStories
sharing the extraordinary in ordinary lives

Slipstreamed

by Leanne Phillips

We enter the Salinas Valley from the south. As we drive into King City, California, it feels as if we are passing through a heavy curtain—the air feels old somehow, the way nostalgia might if it had an odor. It smells of mild onion and sweet dry grass and freshly-turned soil. John Ernst Steinbeck Sr. helped settle this town in 1890, and his son and namesake set his novel *East of Eden* here in 1952. He felt it, too, what I am feeling now. "I remember … what trees and seasons smelled like," Steinbeck wrote. "The memory of odors is very rich." This is the place where I was born, the place I reluctantly came home to when I had nowhere else to go.

King City is a small town at the southernmost end of Monterey County, population a little over twelve thousand. Not much has changed here since my mother graduated from King City High School in 1959. Many of the buildings on the south end of downtown are the same buildings that stood over a century ago—squat, square structures painted off-white, beige, red-brown. There are taller buildings with false ceilings and high, arched facades to make them look more majestic. The Reel Joy Theater, a movie house built before 1922, now accommodates a market; the marquee still towers over the entrance, but today it is a blank slate, and the theater's poster cases act as community bulletin boards. The newspaper, *The King City Rustler*, was founded in 1901, its name drawn from a hat in the local barbershop. Fast food restaurants, gas stations, and a shopping center are exiled to the west side of town.

My three grandchildren and I are passing through on our way to northern California for spring break. We are taking things slowly, breaking the trip up to make the driving easier on me and the traveling easier on Gavin. Gavin will be fourteen next month. He is prone to motion sickness. He is a replica of his father, my oldest child, my son Tim. He has the same dark brown eyes, the same sweet disposition, the same smile—kind and loving. It lights up his entire face. His sister Abigail is eleven. She is my mother's

namesake (her middle name is Vicky) and she looks the part—brown hair, brown eyes, olive complexion, a sweet, shy laugh. Hunter is thirteen. His father is my middle child, Robert. Like his father, he is cursed with an artist's soul. He has sandy brown hair and a mischievous grin and has worn wire-framed glasses since he was a toddler.

My grandchildren have never been here. My parents, their great-grandparents, were gone before any of them were born. This town that holds so much meaning and memory for me is nothing to them. It feels strange to think that.

We drive past the shopping center on Canal Street, and I point out the Mexican restaurant where my sister Lisa and I used to sneak away for secret tacos, under the pretext that something was needed from the grocery store, while our mom was preparing Thanksgiving dinner. My sister and I were not close growing up. We were seven years apart in age, and I left home at sixteen, when she was only nine. During those brief shared moments as adults, we laughed and tried to recapture a bond we'd never quite forged.

"There is the hospital where your dad was born," I tell Hunter as we drive past Mee Memorial Hospital. Hunter is in the back seat and has been playing a handheld video game the entire eighty-mile drive from San Luis Obispo, his head bowed, earbuds blocking conversation. But he is interested now and sets the game aside. "Aunt Moose was born here, too," I tell them. Aunt Moose is their nickname for my youngest child, my daughter, Melissa.

"Was my dad born here, too?" My grandson Gavin is sitting in the front passenger seat. His voice sounds hopeful.

"No," I tell Gavin and Abby. "Your dad wasn't born here, but we lived here when he was little for a while, out in Lockwood. He went to kindergarten there. And when he was sixteen, he took his driver's license test here, right on this very street." Gavin and Abby are excited to hear this. Their faces light up.

"Wow," Hunter says. "Our family has a lot of history here."

"Yes," I say. Then I am quiet. So much of our family's history is hidden away in the things I will not tell them. This is also the hospital where they took my mother to die when she was only fifty-two. We took turns sitting alone with her after she was transferred to a hospital in Salinas and taken off life support. The nurses moved her into another room and treated her body as if she were already dead, allowed her hospital gown to ride up

her legs, her blankets to be pushed aside. I wanted to scream into her ear to wake up, but I didn't. Instead, I rearranged her gown, covered her with blankets, and spent my allotted time speaking softly, telling her how beautiful she was and what a wonderful mother she had been, how proud I'd been to be her daughter. That last thing I don't think she ever knew or believed.

We stop in King City for breakfast, then go to the new Safeway and pick up two bouquets of Easter tulips, orange and yellow. The "new" Safeway is more than twenty years old. When they lived in Lockwood, my parents shopped at the old Safeway on Broadway, and I think of this every time I am here, my mom sending my dad to the store on her every whim, her rules for what could or could not be purchased off-brand. Every so often, one of my mother's grocery receipts falls out of an old book—she used them for bookmarks. Last week, a receipt dated February 24, 1994: Facial tissue, a bunch of bananas, low fat milk, black plums, Anjou pears, something hot from the deli, total $10.51. I keep them all. I cannot bear to throw them away.

We take the flowers to the King City Cemetery. It is a warm, sunny day. The air is uncharacteristically still and quiet. We make our way to the headstones above my parents' graves, using a tree that my parents loved as a marker to guide us. Once we find the headstones, we place the flowers and stand together, quiet. The flowers will not last the weekend, but they are lovely, and my mother would have enjoyed them, especially the yellow ones. Yellow, she once told me, is for remembrance. The south county winds have not been kind. They have gradually washed away the engraving on my mother's headstone, which is nearly twenty-five years old, smoothing the letters out. Soon, my mother's name will be erased. In my mind, I silently introduce my parents to their great grandchildren. Thinking of all that my parents have missed breaks my heart. I watch for a hummingbird—I've come to see them as a sign of my mother's presence—but none come.

On our way out of King City, I see the exit sign for Jolon Road, the road that leads to my parents' last home in Pine Canyon. To Lockwood, where we lived when I was in my early twenties. To Fort Hunter Liggett, the military base where my dad worked after he retired from the Navy. To the Ruby Mine Saloon, where I met my children's father. But

those aren't the things I think of when I see this exit. I think of a single, rainy night when I was nineteen, a camping trip to Lake San Antonio with friends, huddled next to a campfire with a boy named Ronnie, drinking soup out of paper cups.

We merge onto Highway 101, and it feels as if we are gathered up by the south county winds and blown up the valley, carried along by the strong, northwesterly current of the Salinas River. This section of the 101 is bounded by agricultural fields on either side, then mountains. Beyond the mountains to the east is the Central Valley; beyond the mountains to the west is the Pacific Ocean. No matter how early in the morning or how late in the day, migrant farmworkers are in the fields. No matter the weather, they are covered head to toe—hooded sweat jackets, billed caps, rugged boots, bandanas tied over their faces to slow the inhalation of dust. I crack open the car windows to feel the breeze. The air is full with the earthy smells of dark, wet soil and mowed hay, with an almost imperceptible finish of freshly grown lettuce. Overhead, a flock of seagulls caws and flies west, proof of the sea's proximity.

We pass the exit for Arroyo Seco, a river that runs through the coastal Santa Lucia mountain range. I remember going there with Ronnie when we were young, climbing on the rocks, drinking beer on the riverbank at Miller's Landing, getting into our first big fight because I was flirting with another guy.

A welcome sign just outside Soledad reads "Gateway to the Pinnacles"—this sign recently took the place of the funky, rainbow-colored sign I grew up with, "It's Happening in Soledad," an inside joke because nothing is happening in Soledad, ever.

"Somewhere way out there is my grandparents' house," I tell the kids as we drive into Soledad. I point in the general direction of the house, beyond the overpass that runs across the Salinas River, toward the Pinnacles, a mountain range born of the extinct Neenach Volcano. The mountain range was once located in northeast Los Angeles County, but it has gradually and consistently moved two hundred miles northwest over the past twenty-three million years. It continues to move at the rate of an inch per year, with each shift of California's infamous San Andreas fault. Its current trajectory will put it in the San Francisco Bay by the year 23,002,019. The riverbed is usually dry under the overpass, sandy and dotted with vegetation, but an extraordinary rain season has the water running as it did when I was a child. I played on the river's banks then, in the place

where Steinbeck set *Of Mice and Men*, oblivious to the hidden dangers of quicksand and mountain lions.

I can still see my grandparents' old house if I squeeze my eyes closed and block out distractions. It was a box-shaped, mint-colored, clapboard house with a dark gray composite roof, a dank, musty basement, and a mud porch with a heavy, cast-iron sink. On the mud porch, my grandfather knocked the fields from his boots and scrubbed the dirt from his hands with Lava soap each night when he got home. I don't know if the house is still standing—there has been a lot of development in the ten or so years since I last saw it. It was likely razed, but I don't want to know that.

My grandparents' house is a beacon to me. When I stayed there as a child, I felt safe and secure. My grandmother made hot meals every night, bathed us in the giant clawfoot bathtub, then tucked us into clean-smelling, white sheets that felt cool and pleasantly rough, like a kitten's tongue. The room I slept in had been my mother's bedroom when she was a child. Her dresser was still in it—a waterfall pattern with a large, round mirror that I loved to look into. There was a window next to the bed, facing west, and at night, I lay still and looked out through the sheer curtains. I could see the bright stars, vivid pinholes against the rural black sky, and hear the railroad trains in the distance. When I was just turned thirteen, my mother sent me to stay with my grandparents for the summer as a punishment for a failed attempt at running away from home. I was sad to be away from my friends, but lying in bed that first night, I heard the mournful sound of a train's whistle in the distance. Somehow, my own loneliness paled in comparison. We understood one another. I live next to a section of those same train tracks now—they stretch from San Diego to Seattle—and while neighbors complain about the noise from the trains, I find it comforting.

I was raped a little over a year after that last summer in Soledad. I was fourteen.

The rape itself was a trigger—a relatively small event compared to the things that expanded outwardly and exponentially from it like a ripple on the surface of water. I had been more traumatized in those few minutes than I could have known at the time. Out of a sense of gratitude and survivor guilt (I made it out alive, others did not), I became a certified sexual assault and intimate partner violence crisis counselor some years ago. In

my work as a crisis counselor, I learned there are repercussions to experiencing that kind of violence, especially at such a young age. Those repercussions almost always include drug and alcohol abuse, promiscuity, self-destructive behavior, and assorted bad decisions. I experienced them all. I am lucky to be alive and to be as relatively normal as I've managed to be. But those few minutes defined my life.

When I went through the training to become a crisis counselor, I learned that so many of the problems that followed me throughout my life were residuals from that single instance of violence—nightmares, sleep disorders, panic attacks, failed relationships, memory loss, depression, suicidal thoughts, trust issues, sex and intimacy issues. I leave healthy relationships. I cling to unhealthy ones. I've experienced dissociation, something that has been pointed out to me for years as my seeming cold and uncaring about people and things that actually mean a great deal to me. Sometimes, I am unable to cry, even when I feel I must, once for a stretch of five or six years. It also manifests in me talking about traumatic events in a very matter-of-fact way. I may be doing so right now; it is difficult for me to tell, because this has been me since I was fourteen years old. I've experienced a crippling kind of social anxiety that comes off a little creepy at times—I feel uncomfortable and awkward, I don't know the right things to say, and this makes people feel uncomfortable and awkward around me. Alcohol used to take care of that—I'd emerge from too many drinks a sparkling conversationalist, a vivacious reveler, an unruly risk-taker, or an asshole. It was a crapshoot. Without alcohol, it can take me years to feel at ease around someone, to feel able to be myself. In the meantime, I try to fake it with mixed results.

We meet my sister-in-law Gina for lunch in Salinas. My grandchildren talk about things that are happening at school and in their young social lives. Gina and I listen, laugh, ask questions. The kids' conversation inevitably veers to video games and inside jokes. Gina and I move to a different table to catch up. After we part ways, I am left alone with my thoughts and my iced tea in the city where, as a young woman, I fell in love. This trip with my grandchildren was long planned, but the feelings it is stirring in me are wholly unexpected.

I met Ronnie here. We met on his eighteenth birthday, New Year's Eve 1979. Local garage bands were playing at the Portuguese Hall. I was nineteen. I wore a red party dress. My long, strawberry blonde hair was a mass of loose curls—my cousin had done my hair for me. I felt beautiful that night, filled with the kind of confidence a girl has when she's nineteen and is wearing a red party dress. Mutual friends brought Ronnie over to meet me and whispered that he had a crush on me. Ronnie looked a lot like a young Sam Shepard—a tall, lean build, long brown hair, an easy smile that made him look like he knew a juicy secret and was going to share it with you. He had a scar on his right cheek from a car accident he'd been in on his way to Arroyo Seco the year before—it was perfectly positioned and made him look badass. He was soft-spoken, sweet, quick to laugh. Our friends told me it was his birthday and asked me if I'd kiss him at midnight. I did.

I saw Ronnie again on a rainy February night a couple of months later. I'd started dating a different boy, and we'd gotten into a fight at a party. I'd refused to sleep with him, and he refused to take me home. Ronnie offered to give me a ride, over my date's shouted insults about him being a "knight in shining armor," and I accepted. I rode on the back of Ronnie's motorcycle. It was late at night, and the roads were empty and silent. The rain was coming down on us softly, a light Pacific Coast mist, and the streets were wet and shiny, the moonlight reflecting off them. It was romantic, holding on to him tightly on the back of his motorcycle. I felt something for him that night, a stir of feeling for this boy who treated me with respect. But I didn't know what to do with a guy like that.

Ronnie and I started seeing each other a few months later. We were both at the same party out in Prunedale. I was drunk. The band talked me into coming up on stage with them to play bass guitar on "Breakdown" by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers. I can't imagine myself so bold, but back then, I was confident, at least on the outside and at least when I was drinking. I didn't understand then that alcohol was one of the things I used to fake normalcy. Afterwards, Ronnie asked me if I wanted to go out back to smoke a joint. I'd never liked pot, but I said yes just to be with him. We walked away from the crowd and talked, our first real conversation. I remember standing in grass up to our knees, and I remember he made me laugh, but I was wasted and can't remember anything we talked about. I wish I could. I do remember he didn't try to take advantage of me. A week or so

later, he called to ask me out on a proper date. We went out for a burger and a drive, listened to Bad Company, and drank some beers. He stayed over, and we were together after that.

Rain figured heavily in our romance. When the kids and I drove past the exit for Jolon Road, I remembered the night Ronnie and I went camping at Lake San Antonio with friends. The two of us squeezed together into one sleeping bag in a tent. It started raining and our tent had a leak, so we ended up sleeping in an inch of water, limbs tangled. In the early morning, we sat by the fire. He made coffee and wrapped a blanket around us. We watched the sun rise over the campsite while the others slept.

Ronnie was exceptionally cool, but he was also a good man. He was kind. He was strong. Everyone liked and respected him. I've never met that combination of tough and tender since. I've found bits and pieces of him in other men. One had his temperament. One had his build. One had a similar sense of humor but was much less kind. But the piece I've never found to the same degree in anyone else, not even close, is the way he loved me just as I was.

When I was forty, my father told me that no man had ever loved me. He was mostly right, because I mostly chose men who were assholes. I never blamed those men because they only saw in me what I saw in myself, and they only took from me what I threw away with both hands. But my father was wrong--I know Ronnie loved me. There were men who accepted me, but Ronnie celebrated me, and not only the good parts of me, but my faults and insecurities, even the way I talked, my conversation peppered with curse words. He marveled at the big voice that sometimes came out of such a little person. It is a gift to be loved like that.

I didn't understand or appreciate that then. I was too young, and I was too damaged. I had scars, too, but unlike Ronnie's, mine were hidden and had formed over still-gaping wounds. I had a hard time believing Ronnie could love me. I was scared of losing him every minute of every day. When I felt like I cared too much, which was most of the time, I pushed him away, either physically or emotionally. Sometimes both. I was mean to him. I said cruel things. I embarrassed him in front of our friends. I broke up with him, then begged him to take me back. I cheated on him and didn't try to hide it. Friends told me I was playing with fire, that Ronnie wouldn't put up with it. But he did for a little

while. He tried to understand me. He tried to be strong enough to love a girl like me. He was solid and he was patient for much longer than I deserved.

Eventually, my fears were self-fulfilling. One night, Ronnie got off work early and came over to my apartment to surprise me. The month before, he'd done the same thing, and I'd been thrilled to see him. I ran to the door and leapt into his arms, wrapping my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck, and he'd laughed and kissed me on the mouth. But my alcohol-fueled moods were mercurial. This time, I had friends over drinking and playing cards. I'd been flirting with another guy when Ronnie walked in the front door. I continued to flirt and ignored him. He finally reached his limit that night and broke up with me. No amount of apologizing could change his mind. He sometimes sought me out at parties after that, even when he was dating other girls, and he went out of his way to throw a wrench in me dating anyone else. "Watch out," he told a new boyfriend right in front of me. "She's a wanderer." I think he still loved me then, and I know he still wanted me, but he wouldn't take me back, no matter how much I begged. My self-destructive behavior spiraled. When it reached dangerous proportions, some shred of an instinct for survival sent me back home, to Lockwood, in the coastal mountains outside of King City.

Before we leave town to head north, I show my grandchildren the last house I lived in when I returned to Salinas in the early eighties. I lived here with my children—their parents. The house is a duplex off San Juan Grade Road with a little patio where I tried to grow peaches and strawberries. Tim hosted his first sleepover here, fell in love with comic books here, bought his first record album here. I picture Robert as a toddler here, stuffing a grilled cheese sandwich into the VCR to see what would play on the television screen. This was Melissa's first home, the place where she took her first steps, the place where we held her first birthday party and she fell in love with cake.

My son Tim has requested I recreate a picture I took when he was a child while we are here in Salinas. The picture shows my three children, Tim, Robert, and Melissa, lined up outside the front door of this house wearing paper Burger King crowns, Melissa in the middle, chubby-kneed, sleepy-eyed, and leaning back against her two big brothers. But I was standing inside the house when I took the original photograph, so it's not possible to

get it exactly right. I line Gavin, Hunter, and Abigail up on the sidewalk in front of the house for the picture, only we've brought paper hats from In-N-Out and the children wear those. They laugh and enjoy being in on the joke. "Burger King is so 1980s," I type when I text the picture to my children. I take a last look at the house. It is almost the same as I remember it from more than thirty years ago, but it has been painted blue. It was brick red when I last saw it. This house is the last place I saw Ronnie. By that time, I was twenty-six years old.

In Monterey, my grandchildren and I visit Cannery Row and the Monterey Bay Aquarium, and I remember the feeling of being in love with a place. Monterey Bay is the most alive place I know, and it is the place that feels most like coming home to me. It is early spring, sunny, but the air is crisp and cold. Summer used to be my favorite season, but the season I grew up calling summer doesn't exist anymore—it's increasingly too hot. Only bits and pieces of summer remain, little hints that come and quickly go, like the now-rare smell of cut grass. Few people in California have grass lawns anymore because of drought—instead, they have lawns made of dirt, or rock, or succulent gardens. I miss grass. As a child, I loved to lie in the grass by myself, looking up at the clouds and seeing what shapes I could find in them. Now that summer has forsaken me, I've come to relish the chill air in Monterey and the early fog that burns off midmorning amidst the pines.

Here, I am hit with an even deeper sense of loss. My grandchildren and I have an arrangement—they sleep in while I go downstairs to the hotel lobby for early coffee and to write, and when the first of them wakes up, he or she texts me (always he—Abby likes to sleep in), and I come back to the room to gather them up for breakfast and the day's adventures. In Monterey, I take my paper cup of coffee out for a walk along Cannery Row, soaking in the flash of early morning sun on the sea, the sounds of the waves and the gulls, the ocean smells that are so much more intense here. The walk starts out as something peaceful, but a mind emptied of work and worries can be an inviting thing, and the combination of time and this familiar place means mine is gradually visited by memories.

When I was twenty-five, I called Ronnie one night. I was living in Salinas again. I'd never stopped aching for him. I hoped enough time had passed that he could forgive me,

and I believed I was changed. He was happy to hear from me and told me he still thought of me “now and again.” He said it in a slow, amused drawl that was infused with sex.

We met at a pizza parlor with a group of old friends. He’d cut off his long hair. He was still Ronnie—he still had the same mischief in his eyes, the same soft, deep voice, the same slow and easy grin—but he was a man now. After pizza, we went out to the Barbary Coast and drank beers and slow danced. The last time I’d seen him, neither of us was old enough to get into a bar. It was romantic being out together like adults. I stretched my arms up around his neck and nestled into the softness of his shirt, the warmth of his chest. On the dance floor around us, there were couples hooking up, grinding, making out. But they faded into the background. Ronnie held me close to him, his hands at my waist, whispering in my ear, words designed to make me laugh. Despite the disappointment I’d been when we were together, despite all I’d done to hurt him, he treated me like I was something precious, as he always had.

When we said goodnight, he told me he’d really cared for me when we were together, more than I’d known, and that I’d hurt him. I remember feeling sorry for the things I’d done. I remember wanting to make it up to him and being grateful for this second chance. But the thing I remember most was being shocked to hear he’d felt that way about me, surprised to learn I could have possibly had that effect on him. I didn’t recognize my incredulity for the red flag it was—I still didn’t feel worth loving.

My grandchildren and I continue north, to San Francisco, where we walk along the Embarcadero and take a boat out to Alcatraz. It is sunny and warm. Abby scans the water for sharks and requests that we call her Inmate Number 16294 for the duration of the tour so she can immerse herself in the experience. On the island, the audio tour guide tells us that Alcatraz was a maximum-security prison that housed the most violent criminals.

“Why was Al Capone sent to Alcatraz when he was convicted of income tax evasion?” Hunter asks. “That’s not a violent crime.”

“Al Capone *was* a violent criminal,” I explain. “He was a murderer, but he always managed to beat the charges, so the FBI came up with a plan to convict him of income tax evasion. Those were the only charges they could make stick. Pretty smart, right?”

Hunter is not impressed. “If they couldn’t prove the murder charges, they shouldn’t have been able to send him to a prison for violent criminals. That’s their job.” I smile. He is a true believer. I see a career as a civil rights attorney in this kid’s future. Or as a mob lawyer. We stop at Ben and Jerry’s to get ice cream on the walk back to the hotel. The next day, we drive over the Oakland Bay Bridge on our way out of the city. I remember crossing that bridge in the opposite direction with Ronnie thirty years before.

In 1985, at the end of summer, my best friend Kathy and I went up to the Oakland Coliseum for Day on the Green to see the Scorpions, RATT, and Y&T. It wasn’t long after the night at Barbary Coast. Ronnie and I had started seeing each other. He’d invited me to go with him and some of his friends to the concert, but I’d already made plans to go with Kathy. I told him we’d see him there. Kathy and I didn’t have tickets, and it took us a couple of hours to buy a pair from scalpers, so we were late. There was no such thing as a cell phone then. Kathy told me we’d never find Ronnie in the crowd of probably sixty-five thousand people, but as we made our way into the stadium, there he was, standing under one of a hundred random archways right as we came through one of a dozen random gates. The odds were astronomical, but I wasn’t surprised. It seemed fate always led us to each other. He grinned when he saw me, and I felt as if my heart might burst.

We sat together in the sunshine all that day, Ronnie, Kathy, and I, up in the very top of the bleachers, listening to the music and eating chocolate malted ice cream out of paper cups with wooden spoons. It was the best day. When the sun went down and the lights came up, Ronnie held my hand as the three of us made our way down to the field. The stadium suddenly went pitch black, then the Scorpions took the stage to colored lasers sweeping back and forth across the crowd. I felt an electric current go through me. It was something more powerful than I’d ever experienced. The music permeated my body. The love of sixty-five thousand people surrounded me. And the love of one man, his hand warm and protective around mine. Finally, I felt safe.

I went home with Ronnie that night, and we made love for the first time, again. After that, my feelings for Ronnie continued to deepen. I was happier than I’d ever been. My life was beginning in so many ways. I was raising my children and going to community college. In the fall of 1986, I transferred to the University of California at Santa Cruz to

study English literature and creative writing. I wanted to be an English teacher. For the first time in my life, I'd refused the notions of what others wanted me to be and was pursuing my own dreams. Ronnie and I saw each other when my children were with their dad. We went to the movies. He came over for dinner. We played Trivial Pursuit, and he beat me every time. He took me for drives on back country roads and played music for me, our favorite bands or songs he thought I'd like. I will never hear the Scorpions' "There's No One Like You" or anything by Bad Company without thinking of him. I couldn't believe my life was turning out to be so perfect.

The last time I saw Ronnie, it was a rainy night in early February 1987. We had a date. I remember every detail of that night. If I had the chance to live one day in my life over, it would be that one, not only for the magic of it, but for the chance to get it right. Late at night, I remember the two of us lying in bed together at my house in Salinas. Ronnie told me how much he liked listening to the rain coming down outside, how the rain always made him think of me, how it made him want to make love to me. He didn't say he loved me. He didn't say he wanted to marry me. But he told me he looked forward to being married and having a family one day. I read between the lines of all the things he *did* say, and I believed it could happen.

So, I did what I always did. I left. This time, I put miles of physical distance between us. Gone, baby, gone. I dropped out of school, packed my family's belongings, and left Salinas. I felt both nothing and everything when I left. Like some wild animal chewing off its own limb to escape a trap, I wrecked every part of my life to get away from some nameless thing that terrified me, something I wouldn't be able to identify for many years. I moved south, and this time, I heard through friends that Ronnie left Salinas, too, and moved north to Sacramento. By the time I came to my senses and called him a year later, he'd moved on. Really moved on. I guess I thought he never would, not so completely. I never reached him that time. Ronnie's roommate Mark answered the phone. He knew me, and he knew my history with Ronnie. He told me Ronnie had met someone and I should leave Ronnie alone, let him go, and let him be happy. I knew I deserved to be told that. So, I did what Ronnie's roommate asked me to do. I gave up. I let Ronnie go. I tried

to forget him. But whenever I was sad, I shut myself in my bedroom and sat cross-legged in the middle of the floor, playing Bad Company at full blast and sobbing.

I talked to Ronnie one more time, nearly fifteen years later. I found his address online and wrote him a letter in 1999. We had the internet then, but no social media, so I didn't know anything about his life. Ronnie called me as soon as he got the letter—I came home from work one day, the phone rang, and when I picked it up, Ronnie was on the other end of the line. When I heard his voice on the phone, it was as if no time had passed. He told me he still thought about me, and I could hear in his voice that it was true. But he was married, and he had children, and he was happy. Life was peachy, he said. He told me to call him the next time I was in Sacramento visiting my sister and we'd get together for lunch. He said his wife was cool and would be okay with it. I did call him, when I was in town later that year for Thanksgiving, but his wife answered the phone, and she was not nearly as okay with it as he'd thought she'd be. That wasn't a big surprise to me—men can be so clueless.

We chatted a few times after that, on some early computer messaging program. Neither of us ever crossed a line—we only made small talk—but it was sad, and it was still present, the thing between us, only now it seemed dark and ugly, and it hung over us like a cloud. One or both of us finally let it go. I see through mutual friends that he is on Facebook now, but when Facebook suggests he and I be friends, I hide the suggestion, and maybe he does the same. I no longer delude myself that we had a manifest destiny, like some soap opera supercouple that always finds their way back to one another. By all accounts, he is happy with this woman he built a life with, this woman who was ready, who deserved him, and who gave him all the things I couldn't. This woman who I know has made him happier than I ever would have.

I am angry about the things that kept me from being with Ronnie. I am angry with the man who raped me. I am angry with the people who didn't help me or believe me. I wish that my parents would have let me see a therapist after I was raped, but I don't blame them. They did what they thought was best. In those days, dealing with family trauma was an in-house job. Mostly, I am angry with myself that I wasn't more courageous, that I didn't

seek help on my own, that I didn't work harder to overcome what had happened to me. I merely survived, and for a lot of years, I barely did that.

My grandchildren and I visit Sacramento last. We tour the state capitol and visit my sister Lisa in Roseville. She and I have grown much closer over the years. We talk for hours while her daughter—my niece Claire—plays with the kids. The next day, the kids and I drive up to Coloma in California Gold Rush country. This long and leisurely day is my favorite part of the trip. Without modern distractions or cell service, we walk from Sutter's Mill together, the four of us, stopping to read the signs and to talk about Mark Twain and fortune seekers and what it might have been like to have lived in this magnificent place nearly two hundred years ago. We explore the museum, then stop in at the mercantile to pick up mining pans and little vials to hold the gold we plan to find. It is peaceful and perfect as we walk across the bridge spanning the south fork of the American River to get to the beach. We roll up the hems of our jeans and set to work, tilting our pans into the cold current of the river to let the water rush in, then swirling the water out over the edges of the pans so the heavier flecks of sediment are left behind—gravel and some iron pyrite, also known as fool's gold, but we are excited to find even that. After a bit, I step back to watch as the children pan for gold. They help each other, love one another. My family. My life. So perfect, so extraordinarily perfect. *I regret nothing. I would change nothing.* The children tap the gold-colored flecks into their vials, and we walk back to the car, happy and hungry. We stop at the Coloma Club café for burgers and fries, then head back to Sacramento.

Our last night, before heading home, the kids and I go to a Sacramento River Cats baseball game at Raley Field. It is opening night, and we make our way from the parking lot to the stadium through throngs of people. I make no attempt to contact Ronnie while I am in Sacramento—we haven't talked for twenty years. But my body is aware of his proximity. I've heard through the grapevine that he has moved north over the years, first to North Highlands, eventually to Olivehurst, within thirty minutes of the stadium. He keeps moving farther north, and I have moved farther south now, to San Luis Obispo. The distance between us keeps stretching like a rubber band, and I feel it is about to snap.

But as my grandchildren and I enter the stadium, I half expect to see Ronnie standing there—past the gate, under the archway, against all odds, waiting.

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