

Sunset

by
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John wheeled the motor home off the roadway and onto the long asphalt entrance, as Marsha shielded her eyes from the orange-red setting sun. The last rays cut through the low trees and burned right through the windshield, making it almost impossible for the couple to see whether the small guard shack was occupied or not. John squinted his eyes behind his bifocals with their clip-on sunshades, moving his arthritic hands over the large steering wheel, guiding the huge recreational vehicle into a semi-legal parking space next to the little aluminum hut. Marsha closed the creased road map into a neat representation of its original form, sighed, and looked over at John. He smiled at her and rested his hand on hers, an unspoken note of accord passing between them.

John surveyed the park-like open space adjacent to the parking area. There were beautiful clumps of autumn-tinted trees touched with reds and yellows, with quite a few green branches still visible. The fall had been warm and moist this year, and had seen more leaves endure longer on their branches than any fall the two could remember. The land rolled off to the west in slow waves of wild grass hills, the wind casting the tips into parallels of the ocean that lay less than a half-mile beyond. A modest rock-strewn creek ran just to the north of the parking lot, heading directly for the coast, and the beginnings of dark gray granite foothills stretched off to the north.

Marsha rolled down the passenger window and inhaled deeply the moisture-laden air, full of the smell of fish and shells and sand. She thought she could hear seagulls, and wished she could hear the waves. The breeze pulled gently at her short gray-streaked locks, curled closely about her wrinkled brow. She put her hand out into the still warm air and felt it playing about her palm and running through her fingers. She squinted out into the setting sun, so big and orange and near, and wondered if she climbed out onto the nearby trees, would she be close enough to touch that great sinking ball of fire?

The two shared another look between them, this time a bit longer, more personal, more tender. Their hands grasped the other just a little tighter, and their mouths became just a bit drier. With a sense of resignation, John disengaged his hand, turned off the ignition, opened the driver's door and got out.

He climbed slowly down from the RV and bent his worn old frame back into an upright position, joints popping and muscles creaking after the all-day drive. He took off his clip-ons, put them into his breast pocket, then took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. He looked around the parking lot, his gaze resting on the one-room guard shack that stood as a sentinel at the head of the parking lot. There was a large weathered wooden sign leaning next to the shack and John studied it as he shambled up to the door.

One of the sign's gray timber posts was cracked about a foot off the ground and a yellow gash remained where it had been hit, probably the result of some careless motorist. The sign now leaned delicately against the shack for support, and even in this gentle breeze it wobbled slightly every few moments or so. The side that faced away from the roadway was unpainted, and gray deteriorating wood peeled off in thin horizontal strips from top to bottom.

Coming around to the front of the sign, John had a chance to read its faded message. "Honeymoon Heights" it cried out in big curving letters across the top, in colors that once may have been bright red or pink but now stood out only marginally from the pale background color. On the left side of the sign the words "Beautiful Ocean View" were drawn above a rocky shoreline that ran across the bottom of the sign and reappeared as a beach on the other side beneath the words "Last Lodging For Seventy Miles." In the middle of the words and hovering magically above the faint beach was a pale orange sun, partially submerged behind curves of waves that hovered motionless on the sign, never rising nor falling, the glinting rays of the dying sun forever captured on their faded crests.

Though the sign had obviously seen better days and had been abandoned to both the weather and the careless for decades, it still retained some element of greatness, a mysterious touch of grace and style that the creator put in carefully without being too obvious. The overall effect was that of an apple orchard in late fall, most of the leaves gone and many of the apples left on the ground, but with the elegance of the stately rows and upraised boughs speaking volumes for the life still remaining.

He stood there for a moment, drinking it all in, cocking his head this way and that trying to recall what the sign's original appearance must have been like. He looked back for a moment at Marsha, her head resting against the open window frame, eyes closed and mouth smiling, her whole head bathed in the soft orange glow. John rubbed his eyes again, but this time there was water on his fingertips.

John ambled up to the door of the shack and looked in through the window in the door. Inside the single room was a young man with moderately long hair, asleep in an old wooden chair that leaned back against the interior of the aluminum walls. His feet rested on a plastic milk crate a few feet off the floor, which also supported a cheap plastic black-and-white television. Though the sound was either turned down or just plain didn't work, the picture it presented was clear and bright. Figures from some old movie danced across the tiny screen, and as John slowly opened the door he could just barely make out two actors that seemed to be Jimmy Stewart and Jean Arthur, though he couldn't be sure. He looked down at the sleeping man dressed in a plaid wool shirt and blue jeans, a three-day growth of hair across his chin and cheeks.

He stood there for a second or two, expecting that his presence in such confined quarters would surely alert the young man, when he noticed a small silver bell on the tv, with a hand-lettered sign that read in descending rows, "Service For Ring." He smiled at the humor, and tapped it with one long finger. The chime rang clear in the shack, and hung in the air briefly before it drifted off into nothingness, with no apparent effect on the sleeping man. He was about to touch the clapper again when an eyelid lifted minutely on the sleeping man who spoke and said, "You don't need to do that. I've been awake ever since you two rolled in here."

John smiled again at the reclining form, who began to unroll his lanky frame from the straightback chair. The man rested his long arms on his lap, then stretched them over his head as he got to his feet. "Yep, don't know what kind of folks'll roll right on in here and steal the set from right under my nose. Had some kids in here a few months back, wanted that little bell there as a souvenir, would've walked right off with it if I'd a'let 'em." He looked conspiratorially at John, then motioned with his hand. "Go on old timer. Take it. Go ahead, it's all right."

John smiled again in reply and bent down to grasp the bell. He tried to pick it up and felt that maybe it was heavier than it looked and was trying with both hands when the young man broke into a loud, good-natured guffaw. "No use, friend, it's glued down there so good you'd have to rip the whole TV off to take it with you. And you wouldn't want an old piece of junk like that anyhow." The small set displayed two characters walking through a black and white town, arm in arm, singing it looked like, though no sound could be heard.

"So, you two've come to the Honeymoon Heights for your vacation, eh? 'Spect you'll be staying fer four-five days then moving on up the coast to Eureka or Crescent City, right? Y'know, we've got a real good rate on a weekly, and it's only a couple bucks more than a five-day rate."

John looked back at him silently, looked down at his hands and was about to speak when the other man began again.

"No, wait, I got it! You two're retired, right? Just tooling around the area, gittin' a feel for it before you settle down somewhere nearby, right? You know, the Redwoods ain't that far away. You could visit them every week. Why, me and Sally head up there every Friday. Well, not every Friday, on account of her dad is..."

John's face was quiet and calm, not sad nor angry, but a little withdrawn. He stared briefly at the metal wall behind the young man's head, but just as he was going to respond he was interrupted again.

"It ain't a money problem is it? 'Cause I want you to know right off, I'd like to cut you all a deal, you look like real nice folks. But hey, we just haven't had all that much business lately, y'know? Heck, ever since the highway went and passed us by, we've just been barely getting along. So, much as I'd like to, don't go asking for me to swing you no sweet offer, 'cause..."

John's direct look back halted the young man in mid sentence. John's gaze was proud and firm, though a smile still lingered around the corners of his mouth. He took in a breath but was cut off before the words came out.

"Hey look, sorry for what I said. Didn't mean to get you riled at me. I know how you old folks don't want no hand-outs. My Dad was just like that y'know. He'd've walked a dozen miles afore he'd even hitch a ride. Plumb sorry."

The young man finally paused and looked at his older counterpart, out of answers and curious for the first time. "Well, heck, I give up. You ain't on vacation, and you ain't retired. You don't need a free room, and I'm guessing it's not family in the area, on account of there ain't hardly anyone that lives near here anymore." He walked over to the corner of the room and

picked up a wide green ledger with an old ink-stained ball point attached to it by an unthreading white string. “Well, “ he said in a long drawn-out way, “guess it’s your business why you’re here. Won’t pry, not me. Never been one to get into another’s affairs, and I ain’t gonna start now.” He was busy writing in the day, date and type of vehicle on an open line of the ledger when John’s wrinkled hand reached over and gently stopped the pen in mid-word.

“Son,” John whispered as if he had trouble getting the words out, “we’ve come here to die.”

Marsha had her car door opened to get a bit of breeze going in the front seat, but she remained in the vehicle still, warm in the sunshine as she looked at the imposing granite hills off to the north. Rather than see him, she heard John coming as the few stones on the asphalt’s surface scattered under his feet. She had his gait memorized easily, the pattern well fixed in her mind. Thankfully, John seemed to have walked the same way from the first day she met him, walking down that long hill on Maple Avenue next to Sally Helms’ house. His walk was never slow nor hurried; he always seemed to be walking like he was going somewhere he’d been before, and that attracted her right off.

They’d walked a lot of miles together since that first summer, Marsha thought. Only a few more left to go.

John’s step was coming up around the side of the RV now and soon he walked into her sight. Her gaze was looking right at the part in his gray-black hair, and she pulled her eyes down to play over the chocolate-black depths of his eyes, curved by the stout lenses of his glasses. His proud, strong nose split her view and sent her eyes off to the thick dark lashes around his eyes.

She pretended that she was seeing him for the first time. Who was this man? What kind of man was he, that stared back at her so forcefully like he knew her innermost thoughts, for God’s sake?

She smiled. What would he be like, this great, strong-shouldered man, hmm? Would he be...would his touch be tender or rough? What would all her girlfriends think? They’d all be jealous surely, for he was an athletic yet compassionate fellow, always quick with a joke or a song. He’d be good with kids, she decided, with a reasoning born of wish and memory, desire mixed with knowledge.

Would a life with him be fun, exciting? Yes, she knew immediately that theirs would never be a dull existence, yet she stumbled over the thought for an instant. Would he be a good provider, he that seemed so carefree and happy-go-lucky? She could see him easily doing so many jobs. Would he get bored, she wondered? With our home, with the kids - with me? She searched his eyes for an unspoken answer to her unvoiced inquiry. He was so much of what she wanted, had always been looking for in the other boys around town, and had never found until he came along. It would take awhile for him to get used to me, she knew. Hope he has enough stamina to endure my moods and my wild temper.

But he’d never get mad at me. He’d be like that, I know. He’d be so darned understanding it’d probably drive me crazy. And only when he’s away will I be unhappy. Only when we’re apart will ours be a sad existence.

We’d probably grow so attached that we’d never want to be apart, and we’d never want to do anything or go anywhere without the other. What would that feel like, with this deep-eyed man in front of me? What would it be like when there’s another person in this world with whom I can share anything, one special person that I could tell all my deepest secrets too, and who would be my best friend and companion and lover, all at the same time?

What would it be like forty or fifty years later when we’ve lived a life together and raised a family, and know no reality but the one we’ve carved out together? When all our memories are of each other, a lifetime of holidays and evening meals, of waking up next to his warm body and smelling him on my hands and face for the rest of the day, not wanting to bathe or wash, wanting only to keep his smell lingering about me until he gets home from work, when we resume our life together all over again?

She imagined all the thousands of places they would explore together, starting with their tiny hometown and spreading out to all the wonderful, mysterious places she’d read about in books and wanted to see. The Grand Canyon, Hawaii, Paris, London. She pictured them together in hundreds of small black and white snapshots, holding hands on the Champs D’Elysee or kissing with the Tower of London in the background. She dreamed of making love to him in cities all over the world, exploring new lands and languages and foods every day, but with each day always leading up to a glorious night together, exploring each other.

She sighed, and knew that even if they were to see nothing of the world but their tiny home town of Metzger, Oregon, they would both have fond memories of every moment spent together. She knew their days would never be as filled with energy and ecstasy as their nights.

Marsha lived in that nether-world of reality and imagination for a time, bounced off the dread that he might somehow forget her or abandon her, then fell deeply into the warmth of a sensitive, passionate union, feeling the way his hands caressed her neck, the touch of his tongue on those parts of her..

She recalled how they were together, in all but the last few years. Before her eyesight began to fade, when she still melted at the sight of his smile. Before her health began to fade and his body succumb to the ravages of time. Before...before they got old...

Her right hand drifted down to the edge of his green cloth jacket, then let her fingers play with the wavy wisps of hair that fell about his ears. She remembered when most of his hair was long, dark and curly. Frizzed up something awful when it rained.

“Hi there stranger,” she said in a conspiratorial tone. “Know anyone in town?”

John acted surprised. “Why, no! Hey, maybe you and I could hook up for a few hours. You know, have some fun, see the sights. Maybe,” and he reached his arm around her back and pressed his body against her side, “maybe you and I could get together later? Go for a moonlight stroll along the beach?”

“Hmmm, sounds like fun. Oh, but I’m a married woman!” She laughed and pushed at his shoulder with her hand. “Don’t let my husband see you! He’s extremely jealous!”

He kissed the side of her neck and murmured softly, “He’s got a lot to be jealous of.”

“John,” she said in a more subdued manner, “are we...are we doing the right thing?”

He pulled back a bit, looked down, then looked off into the lingering sun, lower on the horizon, almost hidden behind the grassy hills. “Wish I knew, Marsha. Wish I knew. Least ways, we’re doing something.” He looked at her closely. “You having second thoughts?”

“No, not really. I just wish...” Her eyes drifted off to look at nothing in particular, though she was trying very hard to see something. “I just wish we had more time together. I’d like to spend another Christmas with you and the kids, and go carolling again in the old neighborhood like we used to. I’d like to build bonfires again in the backyard in the fall with all the leaves, and drink hot chocolate and roast hot dogs and marshmallows.”

She nodded her head down until her chin almost touched her chest. “I want to be young again, John. Young and beautiful for you, like I was when we first met.”

His deep-voiced response betrayed a hint of emotion. “You are beautiful, Marsha. You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met, and I wouldn’t trade you for any other in the world.” He sniffled slightly. “And I wouldn’t trade away any of our life together, not for anything.”

“Not even for more time together?”

“Well, I guess I would like another few decades with you,” he said smiling. “But it’s just not going to happen. We’ve got to face that. You and I...we’re at the end of the road, old girl. Time for us to be making our plans for...for...” He stopped for a moment, finding it hard to say what they both knew had to be said.

She put two fingers to his lips and shushed him.

“Help me down please?” she asked, her hands held out around his shoulders.

“Sure thing,” he said, brightening a bit. He picked her up out of the seat and placed her feet effortlessly on the ground. He held her there while she tested the pavement with her stiff legs, and when she moaned “ooh” upon the first touch, he put her down on the running board and sat down on the ground in front of her. He rubbed his large hands together for a few moments to warm them, then worked her right leg, starting at the calves and progressing down to the toes, removing her pink tennis shoes in the process. He worked his way up her left leg in the same fashion, no words spoken, only the occasional sigh from Marsha and the energetic murmurs from John.

When he finished, he replaced her shoes and helped her to stand. “Better?” he asked as he held her arm in his.

“Much. Thank you.” They began walking around the front of the RV and strolled slowly out into the fading orange sunlight. “Say, what did you tell the guard at the shack?”

“The truth. He darn near passed out, too. Dropped his clipboard and broke his pen.” John laughed at the thought of him having to revive the young man. “Had to sign the registry book in pencil. Almost signed it ‘Mr. and Mrs. John Smith,’ but thought better of it.”

They had walked a bit further when he said “Got our old cottage, too. Number Nine, the one with the view.”

“Ah,” was all Marsha said in response.

They stood there on one of the low hills, arm in arm, watching the sun disappear behind more of the land that was out of view to them. They came up to the brightly painted blue door on a hut set off somewhat from the others, closer to the cliffs and with what was probably a spectacular view of the ocean in the evening light. Next to the door, facing the parking lot, was a neat square window, framed inside with heavy cloth curtains. They looked at each other as John unlocked the door, remembering the last time they had entered this hut. They held hands as they walked in together.

John unloaded most of their belongings out of the RV while Marsha sat on the bed watching him. They hadn’t packed many clothes for the eight hour trip down to the motel, only a bag for each of them. Oddly, most of their luggage was made up of various cardboard storage boxes and wooden crates, some labeled with two-digit numbers drawn in black marker on the sides, numbers like “58” and “43.” After John had deposited enough containers against one wall of the hut to make a complete wall itself, Marsha raised herself up and went to a particular box near the top.

This box was flat-sided, rectangular, with a red varnish on the outside that was chipped in dozens of places. There was a stain across the top and down one side, but it was still rigid and intact and had obviously performed its job well through many years of service. She wedged open a top that was recessed in a few inches, revealing straw packing clear up to the top.

She dug her hands into the packing, felt around for the bottom of some object, then removed it and the protective straw out in one piece. It was rather heavy and began to slip out of her hands, but John materialized out of nowhere, dropping two small boxes marked “pictures” to catch the slipping object.

“Oh John, that was so close! To think after all these years, I almost broke it!” Marsha was nearly beside herself with anguish, but John hushed her with a calm, steady voice.

“Now don’t fret honey, it’s okay. No harm done, but let me know next time you need something and I’ll get it for you.” He gently placed the still-observed item on a small circular table near the window. When he was certain it was stable he carefully began to remove the straw, placing it in one pile close at hand on the tabletop.

Marsha stood next to him with her still-shaking hands resting on his left shoulder, staring with watery eyes at the object on the table.

The object was an antique of extraordinary detail and beauty. It was an ancient ceramic music box, as large as a wedding cake, made in the style of a turn-of-the-century merry-go-round. There were two dozen unusual animals set in pairs running counterclockwise around a red-and-white-striped central pole. Tigers, reindeer, giraffes and lions chased and were pursued by zebras, dragons, eagles and elephants. Each beast was meticulously detailed and girded in bright pink and yellow ceramic armor, dotted along point and edge with shining stones and gold lacquer. Pennons of every color fluttered in an unfelt breeze from points all along the outer edge of the top, with a ring of mirrors circling in a band just above the animals. They rode in staggered formation on individual golden posts that sank down into the base. Hidden in the base in the back were a small crank and an old toggle switch. Astride the very top was an amber-haired mermaid playing a silver harp.

John slowly turned the crank in the rear of the merry-go-round, touched the switch, and a tune played as the animals began to ride up and down around the central post. The tune was familiar to older couples as a courting song popular during the Great War, when girls would sing it for their men going off to a far away, deadly land. Marsha began to hum along with the familiar chorus, then added the words of the verse:

*My bonnie lies over the ocean,
My bonnie lies over the sea.
My bonnie lies over the ocean,
Oh bring back my bonnie to me.*

John put his arm around her waist and held her tight, his eyes closed, listening to the soft plinks and plunks of the strumming machine. To think of all they’d been through, to wind up here at this time in a small room at the edge of the Pacific, listening to a music box that was older than they playing a song that no one remembered anymore. Old and forgotten they were too, and soon to be no more. The soft plinks and gentle strums of the music box soothed their aching limbs, so peaceful in its melody that they both forgot their troubles and drifted back to earlier, happier times. They both sang the next time the verse came up, as the box’s tempo began to slow:

*The winds have blown over the ocean,
The winds have blown over the sea.
The winds have blown over the ocean,
And brought back my bonnie to me.*

The sounds and movements slowed inevitably, and the centaurs and unicorns eventually ceased their dance and came to rest in the air.

They got up early the next day to walk the beach together, after polishing off a light meal and their requisite two handfuls of pills and vitamins. John had been having problems with his legs for most of the past three years, yet he didn’t complain as they walked slowly out in the cool morning air towards the pounding waves. Their pace was slow and cautious as they negotiated a series of damp concrete stairs that led away from the motel grounds through the low hills nearby. They walked across a short grassy lawn, then down a longer, steeper set of stairs, this one made of closely joined railroad timbers dug deep into the cliffside.

John counted the stairs as they descended. It was a habit and a hobby he had picked up in the hilly area of his childhood: whenever he came to a moderate-to-long stretch of stairs, he climbed them as fast as he could while counting in his head. The numbers represented in his boyish mind how many years he would live. He took it as a personal challenge to get to as high a number as possible without stopping; at least, higher than any of his friends or any other fellow travellers on the climb.

He noticed that when ascending stairs, most people could take the first thirty or forty pretty much without effort, though some of the older people or those with weight problems might have to take a breather. At fifty or sixty a few others would fall out, though John’s breathing was only fraction-ally more difficult than when he’d began. More climbers would go by the seventies, when muscles began to complain and breaths came laboriously. By the time he got to the ninetieth stair (though there were only a few that tall in his neighborhood), his legs were screaming, his lungs were burning and his com-

panions were meager. Not many had his desire for the challenge nor the athletic ability to carry it through. By the one hundreds, even John's heart was pounding in his chest and his legs were wobbly and weak.

There were only two sets of steps anywhere near his home that exceeded one hundred and ten steps: one was far downtown, the other by the toboggan runs at Eagle Bluffs. He didn't often get the chance to take the set downtown, but in the winter when there was adequate snow he took the Eagle Bluffs set as often a night as he possibly could. He'd not only drag his own sled up to the top of the one hundred twenty-two stairs, but would help others with theirs as well. The steps were hewn stone bricks, rough and uneven. Often they were covered with ice or packed snow, and were treacherous to navigate. In all the trips he took, only once did he have any trouble, when he was grabbed by Billy Stroughton as Billy was slipping near the top. John nearly lost his balance and came close to tumbling head over heels backwards all the way down the stairs, but righted himself in time.

That one incident taught John an important lesson: that you can't take anything for granted. It sobered him on his stair excursions, and though he never stopped climbing and counting, he was well aware that someday he might find it tougher than in his youth.

There were only eighteen stairs going down to the sandy beach. They felt like two hundred, and they would have to be climbed back up hours later.

Marsha wanted so much to go out with John to the beach. They had planned for fifty years to take a trip to Hawaii some day. Some day. That some day had never come, just like Paris and London. She didn't blame John, or the kids that always seemed to require their assistance even when grown and on their own. She didn't blame life, although she had expected so much more. She had always given to others around her, family and strangers alike, and knew that someday her generosity would be repaid. That was the way the world worked. Marsha gave in such an honest manner, the way others eat or breathe, without thought or planning. You gave from within to those in need, and the world around would repay you in kind.

It didn't quite happen that way. Certainly her life had been exciting and full of new experiences but they had not been the glorious, magical places she had expected to see. Instead of vacationing in Paris that one summer, they chose to spend their savings on helping their daughter Margaret pay for an expensive operation that was absolutely essential. There was no choice, so Marsha had no regrets.

Their son Bob got into some financial trouble with his new wife the next year, and again John and Marsha came to their children's rescue. That was the year Marsha found the little park outside Sauganaski with the waterfall and the hidden cave nearby, and they spent their allotted time like hermits, hiking among the redwoods by day, making love beneath the crashing waterfall by night. She wouldn't trade those brief days for any trip to anywhere else, yet...

Their trip to London was canceled when John's company went under during a tough economic year. By the time he was back on his feet at a new company, they had used up nearly all their savings. They got themselves into position later on to finally take a trip to the Canyon, and Marsha wound up liking it so much that all their future time, which was never a lot, was spent either on rafts on the Colorado or on horseback on the trails.

Hawaii never entered into the picture after that. Their health wouldn't permit them to take the two-week hike in the Nepali Wilderness that John had always wanted to take, and neither of them wanted to do the hotel-and-surf circuit. She would always prefer to just spend time alone with John than fight the crowds and see the tourist sights. So their rare unoccupied weekends and rarer days off were spent wandering the hills near Portland and occasionally jaunting down to L.A. to visit Margaret and the two grandkids.

The ocean would have to do, as far as a substitute for Hawaii. She drew a deep lung full of moist air and looking around. No palm trees in sight, but as they cleared the last stair and greeted the sand, she was happy enough.

There were clusters of rock formations out near the tide, exposed by the relentless pounding of water and wind. A little to the south was a set of three rocks larger than the rest that held special significance. They had spent the night together there almost fifty years or so ago. Seems like centuries, she thought. Why hadn't they come back here before now? Always so many things to do, she answered herself, people and family and jobs to drain away their time together. I do wish we hadn't waited so long to return. It's such a lovely place.

They walked straight west to the water's edge. Lines of small rocks and shells separated the dry sand from the damp waves' retreat. She bent slowly down to pick up one tiny shell. It was polished and glossy from years of contact with the water, the sharp ridge of a break long since worn down to a smooth texture. She rolled it over on her hands, taking solace in its comfortable feel.

They walked south to the larger sections of rock. Every once in a while the waves would surge up and charge their feet, so at the first large rock, they sat down and removed their shoes. The sun was just coming up over the cliffs in the background, and the sand was warming where it was dry.

Marsha didn't worry overly much about catching a cold. She felt new, reborn, walking this beach, seeing crevices and outcroppings that took her back to her early adulthood. She felt alive, invulnerable, and the sound of the waves crashing on the boulders washed away years of worry and pain. She was happier at this moment than she had been in years, and the doubts that she had entertained the day before melted with the last wisps of low fog under the rising morning sun.

She realized at one point that they had been walking for over an hour without a word between them. They were hold-

ing hands far down the beach, farther than they had been before. Gone were the crags and cliffs near the “Honeymoon Heights,” replaced by gentler hills and bluffs. Dotted here and there across the tops were stately homes and grander buildings, rich and lofty in appearance. Each had a set of private stairs down to the oceanside. How wonderful it must be to be able to come down to the sand every day, to stroll along the beach at your leisure! How magnificent to see the setting sun each night in a panoramic view from your own picture window at the edge of the continent.

She drew closer to John, felt his muscles, still surprisingly strong for a man of his age, and leaned into his girth. He was warm on this side, nearer the sun. She walked attached to him this way down the beach, matching his longer strides as best she could.

She was always impressed with his physicalness. Not that he was a bull or anything. It was just such a pleasant experience to know he was not just a brain and a joke, but that he liked hiking and skiing and all manner of outdoor activities. She smiled to herself, remembering the time their car got stuck in a snowstorm crossing the mountains, when he wrapped his parka around the two of them and kept them warm for fourteen hours. Yes, he was good indoors too.

She loved the smell of his body when it sweated. She loved watching him chopping wood or building a picnic table or putting together a playhouse for the grandkids. Watching his body operating was like watching a fine racehorse move down the track, effortlessly expending energy in controlled passion.

There was certainly lots of passion she thought. Always passion. When there was nothing else, he always made her feel like a queen, like she was the only woman in the world. She squeezed him tight for a moment, remembering when she still had the strength to pull an “oof” out of his great barrel chest.

“John,” she said quietly, “how will we do it?”

They walked on some steps before he mustered up a reply. “I don’t really know yet, love. Haven’t given that detail a lot of thought.”

“No guns, please. I can’t stand them.”

“I know. And I’ve pretty much ruled out poison. Doesn’t always work, and if it doesn’t, you wind up with a hell of a headache.”

She laughed weakly at his humor. It came as a sudden surprise to her that in all these months of planning and discussion on the topic, this was the very first time they had ever really broached the subject of just how they were going to do away with themselves. It turned out to be less distasteful than she had feared, almost thrilling.

“You know, there are lots of medicines that can do it. Do you remember old Mrs. Maraun, who lived on Parker Street? The ladies at the hair dressers always said she did it intentionally.”

“You mean the lady that overdosed on Valium?” John replied.

“Yes, her. The ladies said she took a half a bottle, then downed three martinis and just passed right out. Never felt a thing.”

“Well, that’s one way, I suppose.” They walked on in silence for a few more yards before John spoke again. “Valium, you say?”

Marsha nodded her head into his chest. “Yes, John. I’ve-” she stopped short, then continued in a low voice, barely discernable over the pounding waves. “I’ve got some in my blue bag, back at the room. Two bottles, one for each of us.”

The rest of their walk was cloaked in silence, save for the endless surf rolling up to their feet. All too soon the strain of so long a walk caught up to them, and they knew they’d have to turn back. They turned around to head back to the motel, and noticed that their trailing footsteps had been all but washed away by the inexhaustible surf.

“Read me a letter, John.”

John’s head lifted up from the pillow, unseen in the darkness. He grunted once as if to ask whether she was awake or talking in her sleep.

“Read me one. Please?”

He rolled partly over as the cool air of the room brushed against the bare skin of his arms and neck. “Read you one?” he asked incredulously.

“Yes dear,” Marsha replied slowly. “I...want to hear you talk to me. I want to hear your words one more time.” She shifted her hand over to his arm, illuminated in the moonlight that drifted in from the partially open window. She felt his wrist, moved her hand down there to join up with his fingers. She squeezed lightly and let him put most of the energy into locking their hands together. “Could you find...one particular letter for me, do you think?”

John rubbed his thumb across the cool, thin fingers of her left hand. “Sure. Anything you want, kiddo.”

“Could you...find the letter you wrote to me the Thanksgiving when you were in France?” Her voice travelled up to the top reaches of the room and fell back down like leaves, and John felt them hit his ears and travel into his mind, and as he slid his legs down to the floor he wished deep in his heart that he could hear her delicate requests echoing in his ears forever.

He walked to the wall where their suitcases lay open and braced his hand on the edge of the dresser to help him bend down. He let out a growl-moan of energy as he bent over, poking past a cardboard box, halting for a second, pushing aside a

zippered nylon bag to get to a cloth bag down near their shoes. He straightened up and let out an “aarghh” as he got up and brought the bag to the bed. He had both hands under it, supporting it carefully like fragile glass or a valuable treasure.

He lay the sack carefully on the bed. In the soft moonlight it appeared a medium blue. John saw and Marsha remembered that it was a pink sack, a pillowcase really. It bulged in straight lines and creases all over, edges that were mostly four or five inches long, a few only an inch or two across. John switched on the bedside lamp. He slowly untied the end of the sack and put his hand inside.

He removed at random a multi-hued piece of parchment, the color draining down the thin page, a page that had been folded in half twice with a square stain in one quadrant. A delicate handwriting walked across the surface. The handwriting was well-sculpted and linear, though the words themselves ran up a little and down a little in places, betraying a certain tiredness or fatigue. The capital I’s were strong and even, the p’s drawn with no tail other than a single downstroke, the f’s and j’s with a similar backward curve in their lower parts, r’s made rising to the right.

The upper right corner contained the word ‘Thursday’ and below it ‘4:41.’ “I remember this one,” he said in the half-lit room. “It’s one of yours. From the first Christmas we lived in the old house on Leonard Street.”

Marsha’s lips moved noiselessly in the dark as she mouthed four or five words, and her hand reached up into the air, then fell back and touched his arm. She let it rest there, then turned it over to feel down his muscles with the back of her hand. It dropped slowly down to the inside of his elbow while he began to read:

I’m so sleepy. I feel utterly drained and emotionless. Not depressed, not sad, not angry or upset or happy or anxious - just tired - apathetic. Apathy - one of my most hated things - not usually a word I would associate with myself. I guess I’m not totally apathetic or I wouldn’t be writing this. Am I right?

I want so much to curl up within you - no words - no eye contact even. Just feeling you encompassing me - separating me from the world.

RJ wants his bottle, be right back

Anyway, highlights of my day:

1. Being with you on your thighs, on the back porch this morning before you left, and

2. Planning your surprise for the day after tomorrow. If it all comes off the right way and you are pleased, my Christmas will be made. Christmas comes to Leonard St. on Dec. 20th this year.

Tonight’s plans:

1. Bake 3 batches of Christmas cookies.

2. Wrap kids’ presents and fill stockings.

John pulled an identical piece of parchment out from behind the previous one, folded so precisely that it was almost part of the first one. The same writing continued, and he read on:

3. Find the rest of the Christmas decorations. Margy says another box is under the stairs down in the basement, but we couldn’t find it.

4. Try to call you at your hotel tonight.

5. Finish some of the work Mr. Weisholtz wanted me to finish today. If I can’t get the numbers right tomorrow, I’ll have to work on it over the weekend. And you don’t want that!

6. Miss you.

7. Go over to Ruthie’s and help her with her Aunt May.

8. Miss you again.

9. Go to bed and dream about a future where you and I are together, and the kids are happy and healthy and strong and living their lives somewhere, not too far away, and you and I are together every night, not just two or three nights a Crazy dreams?

So - we have a date Saturday night, 10:45, our place. Keep your eyes open and hopefully the kids will be all asleep. Don’t worry about getting in too late. Only I will know, O.K.?

Remember who loves you. I do.

John slid the page in behind the first one, fitting perfectly together like there was only one. He put his left hand down on the sack next to him, then over to rest on Marsha’s.

“That was such a long time ago,” Marsha said so slowly. “Did I really write that? Seems like two other people entirely. Surely,” and a soft cough came up in her chest, “surely we two were never apart. Not for a whole week anyway?”

“Oh yes,” John replied in a mellow way, his hand running softly over the veins and knuckles of her hand, his thumb and forefinger caressing hers. “There were whole months when you and I only spoke on a telephone once a week, or wrote letters to each other. Damned slow, letters. And when I’d get one, one of yours, I’d read right through it and want another one immediately. Instantly! Damned nuisance.” He looked back at her thin body there under the quilt. “You could really write, you

know. Much better than I ever could.”

“Oh, pshoo” she said and pushed him away a fraction of an inch in mock indignation.

“No, really. Mine were always filled up with flowery things, poems and rhymes and such. But yours-” He looked at her eyes, and they were staring back at his, not up in the air or glazed over like so often lately. There was still a spark in there, fighting to burn on, struggling to keep lit. He found himself talking past those bright eyes, talking to whomever or whatever was behind the eyes, behind the letters and the memories and dreams. “Yours were always a whole world for me. They lifted me up whenever I was down, worrying about how you and the kids were getting on, worrying about the bills and Mr. Connors and all the travelling. Your letters brought all the house to me. I could taste your cooking just by listening to you write about the kids helping you make dinner. I could hear the wind in that big maple tree out back when you wrote about the sounds it made on nights when I wasn’t there.”

He brought his head down closer to her. “Your letters brought you to me.”

He returned his hand in the pink sack, pulled out a folded paper party hat, pulled out a long piece of powder-blue ribbon and a partly-crumpled sheet of cardboard with the words “Happy Halloween” painted in orange and black watercolors by a thin bouncy paintbrush. He picked up a yellow envelope with the address “Marsha Goddell, 620 Leonard Street, Portland, Ore,” without a Zip Code or return address. John flipped the envelope over. Across the back of the flap was the writing “M.H.G.” and below that the words ‘That stands for ‘Married Happily, Gorgeous.’ “Here it is, dear,” he said quietly. Opening the envelope, he stared at the letter inside for a few moments before he began to read it.

The paper was rough and dirty like it had been written outdoors, and the handwriting was uneven and changed ink in several places, seemingly penned over an extended period of time. There were a few places, like the introduction and one whole paragraph in the middle, where a section was cut out with a knife or dull scissors, censored with uncaring hands:

Dear loving, loveable Marsha,

I hope I’m not that “horse with a bad leg” for you. Although you often worry that you’re “not right” for me (tho you are, I assure you), it’s me that feels I’m not good enough or perfect enough for you.

I’m always striving for perfection in ways that no one else does, while in the “normal” arenas where success is measured, I’m often not very interested. While others are busy fixing the roof or painting the barn, I’m drawn to reading as much of the Daily Herald as I can or sending away for some new study-by-mail course - at least I was up until this past year. I’m always doing ‘one more thing’ before we head out, and I’m forever volunteering for the toughest assignments as if I’m 6’5” and 250 pounds, or that I’m three people or something.

And yet, no matter how much I do or accomplish, it never seems to be enough. I continually hook up with officers who seem very unappreciative of all the extra effort I put in, tho I’m always blessed with exceptional people to stand beside me. I have these ‘abilities’ that feel like such a burden to use, and all the self-imposed pressure actually seems to force me to sometimes hide from the other guys and any responsibility at all. Which is why I disappear totally when things get too much for me - which isn’t often.

I need an exceptional person beside me, to aid me, to teach me, someone I can lean on when I weaken, yet someone who is also a ‘traveller’ and is looking for more from life. I notice I’m willing to wait a near-eternity for the right person in all the right areas - like you, Marsha Anne. It would be impossible for me to get along over here without knowing that you’re back in the States, with your humor, your generosity, your insight and intelligence, your energy and openness. Those and many other rare and wonderful qualities make you a truly special person, one that I would gladly go through Heaven and Hell to get to.

And I know I don’t have any right to ask you - and that I should have said something to you before I shipped out - but, well, could you, I should say, would you wait for me? To get home that is, before you make any, you know, decisions - Hell, all I’m trying to say is, I love you, and I want to marry you when this is all over. If you’ll have me.

I love you like I don’t know what!

There was a long silence in the room at the end of his reading, when John thought he heard another cough come from Marsha. He leaned down close to her face, her eyes closed and her head back on the pillow, and listened closely. The sound came again, and this time he realized it was a weak laugh, coming from down deep in her chest. “Oh you were so timely with that letter, John. Franklin Angstrook, from over in the valley, had just come by the house that morning and was all bent on getting me to go with him to the show that Friday. But when your letter arrived, I picked it up and went into my room upstairs and read it, then I read it and read it again. Before I knew it, poor old Franklin had left and gone home.”

She smiled up at his face, close now, their breath melting into one. “I sure wished with all my heart that day that you’d come back safe and sound, so we could raise a family and grow old together.” She looked down at the covers that barely covered her weak, thin frame. “Guess I got my wish, didn’t I?”

John bent down and kissed her on the forehead, then on her cool nose and lastly full on her lips. It was a long kiss, one of passion and strength. He pulled away and waited for her eyes to open up and look at him. “I got my wish too,” he said, then leaned over and put out the light.

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Around lunchtime the following day, a large white and black car with a big gold star on the door pulled up to the guard shack. From inside, the young man came around to the rolled-down driver's window, talked animatedly for a minute and pointed down to Bungalow Number Nine. The cruiser slowly rolled to the end of the parking lot in back of the RV, where the driver put it in park with the motor running.

A tall beefy officer with reflecting sunglasses got out slowly from the car. He stared at the shiny blue door with the carefully

painted "9" on it. He walked over to the RV, checked to make sure it was locked and apparently empty. He scrutinized the maps and matching coffee mugs that sat on the dashboard of the tan vehicle, along with a roll of Lifesavers, a change purse and two or three pens. He noticed the closed curtain windows, looked up at the cloudless blue sky, glanced behind the building at the gulls wheeling in the sky near the coast, and generally did everything he could to delay approaching the shiny blue cabin door.

The young man was shuffling down the asphalt with his hands hovering at his side like some tin-horn gunfighter in an old western. In too loud a voice he called out, "Well? Are they-"

"I'm gettin' to it Earl, so just hush up!" the officer called out in reply. He drew himself up to his full six-foot-plus height, then authoritatively strode up to the door. He brought his hand up to knock on the door, then paused and delayed for a second. "Well?" came to him from the young man now standing not three feet behind him, and he turned to glare back at the young man. Finally, he rapped hard four times on the door.

"Open up in there. This is the police."

No answer came back to the two.

"See, I told you they was crazy, Luke!" the younger one said animatedly. "I knows they was crazy the first time I laid eyes on 'em! They went and done it, sure as we're standing here!" It was hard to tell if the young man was scared for his life or just more excited than he'd ever been, but it seemed like one or the other.

"Shut up, Earl! This is official police business, so just back off and give me some room!" The officer drew himself up taller and rapped again on the door, harder this time. "Listen you two. Either you open up this door or I'm gonna break it in. You hear me?!"

The younger man lifted a hand way up to jangle a large key ring near the bigger man's ears. "Hey, I got the keys right here, Luke. Don't go breakin' no doors on account of the likes of them. Hell, those doors cost fifty--"

"Shut up, Earl!" The officer was clearly scared and frustrated. He seemed ready to bash the door clean in with his massive shoulders, but instead turned his massive fist into a club and pounded on the door. "Open this door right now! I mean now! Open it or so help me--"

A quiet "click" was heard on the other side of the door, barely audible above the officer's ravings. The younger one dropped back in a crouch behind the bigger man, and spit out, "Watch it, Luke! They's got a gun!"

The officer stood there with his fist in the air and a beet red complexion on his exasperated face, just as Marsha pulled open the now-unlocked door. She appeared to have come out of the shower, her hair still damp and wearing a pink flowered dressing-gown. She had a white hotel bath towel draped over her shoulders and she used a corner to clean out her right ear. "Well what's all the commotion out here? You boys in some kind of trouble?" she asked in a polite, sweet-toned voice.

The officer's large jaw had dropped open upon greeting a live human being, but he quickly gathered himself together. "Uh, sorry to bother you ma'am, but there's been a report that you and your husband were..." His sentence fell off as he removed his sunglasses and took a long look around the inside of the room.

If he had had the misfortune of arriving at the scene of a flea market that had been hit by a tornado, then surely this is what it would have looked like. Inside the small one-room bungalow were crammed all sorts of odds and ends, brick-a-brack and every kind of novelty imaginable. It started around Marsha's feet, where her ankles met stacks of old newspapers, letters, birthday present wrapping and cut-out recipes. There were dozens of boxes and crates just behind the door, stacked on top of each other and apparently empty. A string of flashing Christmas lights snaked around the wall, circled a nearby light fixture, sailed across to the top of the bathroom door and waltzed over to the bedside table.

The light fixtures all had at least three colored balloons dangling from them, and the mirror over the dresser had two rubber-tipped darts affixed to it. All the walls were covered with handpainted pictures of red houses, green mountains and yellow dogs with lots of hair. On the bed were old clothes two and three decades out of date, each looking like they had been worn and then thrown down on a pile. In the center of the bed was an open jar of peanut butter, a half-empty loaf of bread and two empty aluminum cans that said "Iced Tea" on the sides. Picture albums were open everywhere, as were books and collections of old 78's. On the round table near the door was a ceramic merry-go-round, next to it a pile of straw.

"Who's that at the door, Marsh?" came a voice from the vicinity of the bathroom. "If it's room service, tell them we ain't ordered yet, but I'll take six eggs any way I can get them!" A loud guffaw followed the food request.

The officer's hand slowly came down to his side as he surveyed the scene. He pivoted his head around to look behind

him at his still-hiding companion. "How long did you say they'd been here?" he asked incredulously.

"Two days only, Luke, I swear! And look at this place! It's a disaster! Who's gonna clean this up? When Sally hears about this she's gonna scream!"

The officer's hand found its way to the handle of his holstered revolver. He thought slowly for a few seconds about taking it out, but couldn't decide whether to use it on the loony occupants inside or on his goofy friend outside. He decided instead to whirl his young companion around in place and march him away from the door, with a "Sorry to have troubled you folks" tossed as an afterthought over his shoulder.

"Tell him large o.j., toast, no bacon. And I prefer scrambled!" John yelled out to them as they walked slowly away.

Marsha closed the door, relocked it and finished drying her hair. "Are you really hungry dear?" she called out to the hidden man in the bathroom. "We could go out for some breakfast if you'd like. Or lunch, either one, I don't care."

A damp-haired head poked out of the bathroom. "I'm hungry, but not for food," it said, then issued a growl and retreated back inside.

"Oh you!" Marsha responded, laughing and slapping the clothes covered bed with her hand. She got up and finished dressing next to the night table, then looked down at the phone. She sat down on the bed and picked up the receiver, read the instructions for making a long-distance call on the card next to the phone, then dialed in twelve numbers on the push-button face. She gave up after three attempts, then went and retrieved her glasses, switched on the table light and tried again.

Presently she started talking. "Hi there, Daniel? Hi there hon, how are you? It's Granma calling. What? Oh she did, did she? Well you tell her she shouldn't do that. Tell her she's supposed to share. What? Oh, well, you're welcome. I hope you like the color and- what? For Christmas? Oh, but that's still so long away, dear. You've got months to go before you need to- well, I don't know. Yes we will. Well, we'll try at least. Yes. Yeah, he's still in the shower I think. What? Oh my yes, he takes one every day. Oh you don't, huh? Well, the girls in school won't care much for you if you only take a bath once a week. Oh, it is, is it?" She laughed once, paused, then laughed again heartily, which started her coughing.

After she got her cough under control, she broke in on the youngster's story. "Listen dear, I'm calling long distance and it's awful expensive. Let me speak to your dad or mom. He is, is he? Well that's good, I guess. Is your mom there? Well, ask her if I can speak to her." Marsha pulled the phone quickly away from her ear, and a young boy's voice could be clearly heard screaming for his mother.

After a few moments another voice came on the line. "Hello there Margy, how are you? Oh we're okay. Yes, yes I know, but well, we just wanted to get away by ourselves." There was a long pause while Margy on the other end had something to say, to which Marsha could only nod her head semi-guiltily and murmur assent.

John produced his entire body, clad in blue jeans and a white t-shirt, drying his hair with a white towel. He mouthed the words "Who is it?" to which Marsha replied "Margy and she's mad at us."

John smiled as Marsha went back to her barely audible "yes's". Finally she was able to get a word in. "No, of course we didn't, darling, but we're not kids anymore. Your father and I can take care of ourselves and if we decide this is best for us, then that's it." Marsha bent her head down for a moment and closed her eyes real tight, then said, "We've decided to do it tomorrow morning. After the sunrise."

A small amount of tiredness had crept into Marsha's voice, and she wrestled with the words. "You don't know what it's been like. Every day is so - yes, of course I still do," and as she said those words she looked across at John carefully parting his few remaining hairs in the mirror. Her eyes began to tear up, but she gained control and returned to the conversation. "We're just so tired, dear. We've done nearly everything we wanted to do, and it's getting so difficult to do even the simplest things these days."

By now John was finished in front of the mirror, combing his hair. He turned around and came over to sit on the edge of the bed next to Marsha. "Here, let me talk to her."

Marsha gave up the phone with a quick "Here's your dad," then got up to go stand by the curtained window.

John's voice was booming and as cheerful as he could make it. "Hi sweetheart. Sure you are - sure you are. Listen - listen to me for a minute, will you? Yes, you're probably right, that was an awful way of finding out. Yes, we should have told you in person, but, well, we knew you and Farren would just try and talk us out of it, and we'd all end up arguing. Is it so hard to accept our point of view?"

He waited for a while, then said, "But it isn't, sweetheart. It's ours. Our lives, our decision." Another pause. "Of course we do, dear, but it's not that easy. Neither of us are getting any younger, and both of us have got-" Another pause, this one a bit longer. "Yes, we did tell you that, but this is different. Back then you were still young, and you had so much ahead of you. Now, well..." and John's eyes strayed to Marsha as she peeked out at the sun high up in a blue sky.

"Listen sweetheart, it's like this. Your mother and I have led a full, happy life. We've been together through the whole thing, and we want to face this together too. We never ran away from anything, and we always tried to do the best thing for you and Rob, for the grandkids, for all of us. We don't want to go slowly, although by God that's what it's felt like these last years." Pause. "No, it isn't, and it gets worse every day. We went for a walk down by the beach yesterday - up north here in California at the "Honeymoon Heights, the place we came when we got married." Pause again. "Yes, yes of course we do, but listen to me. Anyway, we both walked down to the beach yesterday, only for a couple of hours, and by the time we got back

to our rooms we both thought we were going to collapse! We were so tired we took a nap and slept right through dinner, got up in the middle of the night and...well, we, uh, fixed up our room and had some snacks. Anyway, the point is, we just can't get around anymore, not at all like we used to."

John switched the phone over to his other ear, and his cheerful, energetic tone was beginning to fade. "We try and do the best we can, but why should we settle for a second-best existence? We know we're going to go soon, and not more than four or five years from now at the most, probably." He sighed and listened to the voice on the other end pleading, begging with him. Finally, resignedly, he said, "It's no use, sweetheart. We've decided. And that's the way it's going to be."

He got up with the phone in his hand and walked over to Marsha standing in a crevice of sunlight as she held open one side of the curtain. He dragged the phone off the table, falling onto a stack of old comics and a yellowing book titled 'World Atlas.' He encircled her shoulders with his long right arm, while listening to the phone with his left hand. "You know what it comes down to, really? Bottom line, as you kids like to say? Comes down to this: I couldn't live a day on this planet without my lovely Marsha, and she wouldn't want to live without me. We've talked about that for, hell, ever since we met. Life would just lose its meaning for both of us. And what if something happened to one of us, and we got laid up in the hospital and you or Bob had to pay for the bills? Yes, I know we did, but it's so much more expensive nowadays. And besides, we just wouldn't want to go on like that, all hooked up to tubes and wires and such. I know I wouldn't last long like that."

John noticed Marsha was fighting back tears, and he neglected the phone temporarily to put both arms around her and hold her tight. He kissed the top of her head, then listened back at the receiver again. "Yes, we're right here. Yes, well, thank you, sweetheart. That means a lot. Listen, tell Farren we said good bye. Tell him," and here John had to stop for a moment while he gathered himself together. "Tell him to take care of you and the kids, 'cause he's got just about the second-best wife in the whole wide world." Marsha reached up for the phone just then and quickly said "We love you, dear," to which John added his "We love you," then they walked back over to the table and placed the receiver back down in the cradle. They stood together next to the phone, holding onto each other, the sound of their daughter's crying reverberating in their ears.

Presently, John bent down and dialed another long distance number and held the phone up to a spot half way between their two ears, so they both could listen. The connection clicked on, and just as he was about to start talking, the recorded voice of their son began to talk to them as if they were business clients. They waited for the message to finish, but when the mechanical beep sounded, they found they had nothing to say. John jumped in hastily with "Hello son. How's the weather out there? Listen, by now you've probably gotten a long letter that your mother and I wrote last week. Look, it's all right, we don't want you to worry about us, it's just that..." His voice drifted off and he let the phone sink down closer to Marsha's ear.

"Hi Bob. We love you. Listen, do me a favor, will you?" Her voice was steady and clear, without emotion or sadness. "I want you to stay in touch with Margy. She's all the way out here in L.A., I know, but she's going to need you now, more than ever." She thought quickly to herself of all the thousands, the millions of things she wanted to say to her son, with only seconds in which to do it. "I hope everything goes okay with you and Erena, you two seem so happy together. And don't worry about your father and me, we'll - " Her sentence stopped with the intrusion of the beep for a second time. She held the phone out to John and asked, "Should we call him back do you think?"

"No," John said, pulling in a long breath and exhaling slowly. "Let's get this room picked up. The manager'll think we've gone off our rocker."

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Next morning, the room was as neat and as tidy as the day they first arrived. The contents of their lives were once again packed neatly in their containers, the containers stowed back on their RV, no trace of their having been in the room at all save for a few strips of cellophane left on a wall or on the top of a door, and a wisp or two of straw under the table by the window.

The shiny blue door with the "9" painted on it had two rubber-tipped darts stuck on the outside. The room key dangled from the end of one dart, and from the other hung a single envelope.

Out in back of the bungalow, along the damp concrete trail, walked an elderly couple in the early morning sun. The woman, elegant and radiant despite her years, wore a light pink windbreaker, while the taller man with thick glasses and an old rucksack across his back strode slowly but unbowed alongside.

They weren't headed for the beach like most of the couples who came to the "Honeymoon Heights." They were pointed in the direction of the great gray granite hills to the north. Of the few adventuresome souls who climbed their jagged sides, most exclaimed that when they had reached the summit, they had never wanted to climb back down.