

Interval

1983, late in the afternoon, somewhere between Benque and Caledonia. A blond woman in a red shirt drives a motorbike through canefields, a young boy holding on behind her. The road is flat, straight, baked, powdered limestone. The shape of the horizon is notched in the deep green cane, overborne by the weight of the blue-violet sky. The woman and boy seem unhurried but move steadily east. The red ribbon in her hair is coming loose.

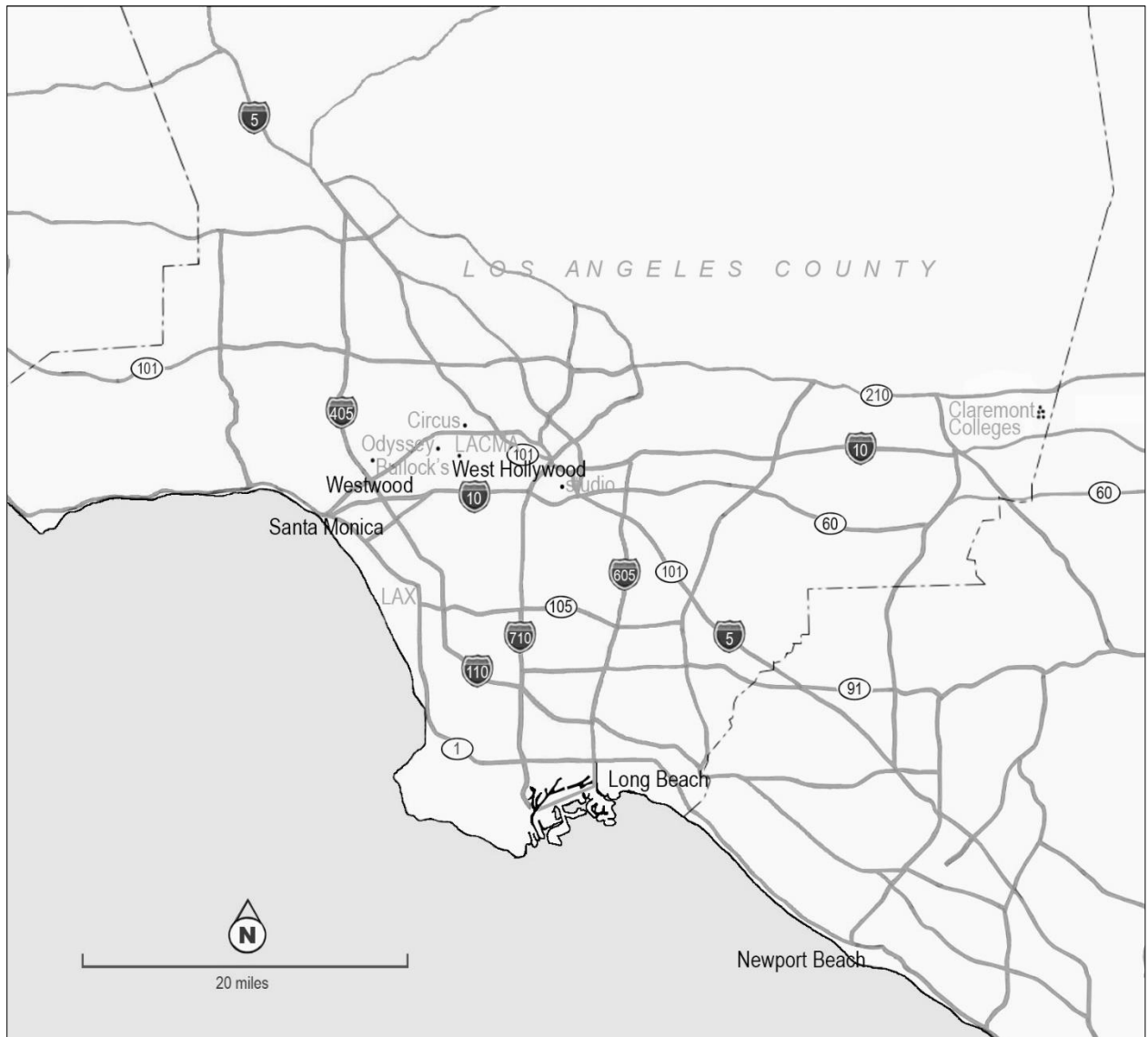
The road rises minutely and she cuts the engine. They roll silently to a halt at the top. Below them the river looks motionless. Opaque water reflects the sky. Fat iguanas loll on the sandy banks. As the pair coast down to the crude dock the iguanas leap up onto their long-elbowed legs and fly, splayed, off the banks into the green water, splatting the sky to bright smithereens. At the water's edge woman and boy dismount the bike laughing.

It is still hot, and here on the pale riverbank the sun radiates off the sand. They share a drink from an orange carton and wedge it back in the basket. They take turns cranking the cable that brings the ferry raft toward them on drum pontoons, a well-practiced routine. The woman rolls the scooter onto the ferry and the boy starts cranking again. As she kicks the stand down her ribbon falls off and slips into the water. The boy stops, and they watch it float away. The river is moving faster than it appears.

The ribbon drifts around the long bend. Her hair loose the woman is no longer blond, but a brunette with sun-bleached streaks. The boy is very dark, with sun-striped maroon locks on his dark head. He takes her hand. She gives it a quick, tender squeeze and then lets go to reel them the rest of the way across the river. On the other side they lodge the raft on the sand. She kicks the motor to life, the boy climbs on, and they continue east, now between tangled walls of high bush.

The cane forms a wall for miles along the bank behind them. Ahead the land is not farmed, and no light pierces the snarled canopy. Beyond the forest lies swamp and pocks that sometimes become lagoons. They already know that was the only ferry. If they can get through to Progresso there is a big lagoon that sometimes becomes an inland sea. At the precise fulcrum of the seasons, wet balanced with dry, it is deep and clear, and they say you can make it there from here.

Chapter 1



This is not about the past.

Anne writes it on a post-it in red marker and sticks it on the cabinet. It is important that this message stream into her just like the coffee in that cabinet. The kitchen windows face east, and she loves to stand there as water heats and the cats jump onto the counter for the stove's

warmth and her own attention. She looks out at the limestone ridge, and waits for the sky to grow lilac from blue-gray: the reliable, clear, mineral dawns of south Jordan.

Drudging through the final reports on a Saudi contract, she takes breaks to research the upcoming trip with her mother. Even while staring at images of wind-rumpled lapis-blue sea, or tracks through orchid-hung jungle, it is too easy to stray into remembered or imagined conversations and the teeth-grinding that comes with them. Anne and her mother will make this trip together, another of a hundred road trips. And this one will be different, she promises herself: like before, but better.

Her mother is a lovely person, by all accounts. In Santa Barbara Em is the Queen of Lunches. Em is for Emma, but also “M,” for Mom. She is eight-two and still entertaining, hiking, birding, still working most early mornings in her enormous garden. Then she gets cleaned up, blow-dries her tidy silver bob, and ‘dresses appropriately,’ which is a kind of religion. She shops with vigor and lunches with friends most days, rarely resisting that third glass of chardonnay. Anne sits imagining this scene and she’s already grinding her teeth. It will be fine. Everything will be fine.

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Anne was six feet tall by the time she was fourteen. She’d been skipped a grade because she was smart enough, but mainly she was physically overdeveloped. She got her first bra when she was ten. She had opinions, too, and her burgeoning breasts and smart mouth flipped some primal switch in her father’s brain. He was hell to live with for Em and Sam, too, but somehow Anne roused his ire like no one else. Sam, three years younger, was skilled at vanishing when the shit rained down. Em just stepped out of the way. Dad yelled and cuffed and swatted. Anne defended herself yelling and squirming and kicking, which only made him more furious. He invented bizarre disciplinary exercises, like making her dig all the dandelions out of the so-called lawn with an icepick for hours after school, on her knees in the front yard until Mom called out, “wash up everybody!” Then they would sit down to a dinner which would, five or six nights a week, end with Sam doing his ghost imitation, Em in tears, and Dad and Anne yelling at each other.

And the thing was, she wasn’t a bad kid. Her grades were good. Her cardinal sin was pissing off her father, which she could do just by looking at him cross-eyed. Worse, Anne might

disagree with him about something like gold mines in Rhodesia or the spelling of a word. Then there was a loaf-thick dictionary on a pedestal in the dining room to consult, the shelf of encyclopedias. If they disagreed with Dad, they were obviously wrong. Because, as he was fond of reminding them, *there are two ways to do anything: John's way, and the wrong way.*

The most famous fight, if not the worst, was The Fishes. Anne and Sam and Em can still laugh about The Fishes. After a few drinks, especially if they are heading into some arcane argument, just saying "The Fishes!" will crack them up so hard they can barely breathe.

"Fish," said John, "is a collective noun. Like deer, and information." (The context from which The Fishes rose is lost to history.)

"But you can say fishes, too." Anne *could not* help pointing out.

"No, you can't."

"You can – it means groups of species. Like you say 'a school of fish,' but –" Anne tries to think of an example –

"You cannot say fishes."

"You can! Like – 'of the various fishes which inhabit the Indian Ocean.'"

"Why do you always have to kick against the goads?"

"We have a book here in this house called *The Fishes*." They were both steaming. Anne hated him. She couldn't shut up. "It's one of those Time-Life books. I'll go get it."

"You will do nothing of the kind. You will sit right there and finish your dinner."

Anne got up. Of course.

John grabbed her arm and sat her ass back down at the dinner table.

Anne glanced across the table at Sam, who gave her a look of contempt. Why couldn't she just shut the fuck up? Em sat very still at her end.

Anne pushed her chair back quickly and scooted through the kitchen into the den. Silence held for a moment as she scanned the bookshelves, then she heard her father's chair scrape back and here he came. She found the book – tall, slender, marine-blue, the title in white capital letters: *The Fishes*. John grabbed it out of her hand and whacked her with it, first the flat side,

"You do not,"

– then with the spine – "leave the table"

– then the corner – "without permission."

Anne squirmed away and ran for her bedroom, slammed the door. That time, at least, her father didn't follow.

Dark-haired, curvy, with bright skin and fine features, Emma had been a prom queen in high school, and edited the school paper. John had been a star swimmer, a tall, dark-eyed, handsome guy. Emma grew up alone with her widowed mother. John was the eldest son of a wealthy family, recently immigrated from South Africa. He and his brother drove their own car to school. Everything about him seemed new and – moreover – different: his car, his prep school clothes, his accent, his family. John called her Em: he said Emma was stuffy. She set her cap for the man, brought home the prize. All this Anne knows from her mother's own stories.

Off they went to college. Em wanted to be a journalist. John read Kerouac and Ginsburg and learned to surf. They were married at Christmastime their junior year, and went to Rosarito Beach for their honeymoon because they had to make it back in time for classes. Em has a dozen times recounted how she knew before six months were out that she'd made a mistake, but by then she was six months pregnant with Anne. She changed her major to education, because she was going to have to get a job, and soon. John never graduated from college. Em taught junior high geology. John drifted from one thing to another. He worked for his father's mattress factory but something went wrong and his father cut him loose. John sold insurance, managed a chain of laundries, apprenticed to an optician. Em was the 'primary breadwinner.'

By the time Anne was in high school Em was a little chubby. She wore her dark pageboy short and chic, and styled herself after Jackie Kennedy (who would never be Jackie Onassis to Em). She had decided views on fashion. *Vogue* and *W* were always lying around the house, the lollipop models forming the standard by which all else was judged. She was fond of saying that "just because you're a teacher doesn't mean you have to look like one." The September issues of *Vogue* and *Seventeen* were dogeared and thumbed until the page-edges were fuzzy.

But in 1973 no one made fashionable shoes for girls in size 10. Pants were never long enough for Anne's long legs, and the going thing was wide-legged, high-waisted Dittos that dragged on the ground behind your clunky platform sandals. Anne wore boys' desert boots and jeans. The agony of watching her daughter go off to school fashion-free was unbearable. Em taught Anne to sew. They went to the fabric store and picked out patterns from the *Vogue*

catalog. Anne became skilled, but Em was not about to have her *trailing around looking like a hippie*. And you can't sew shoes.

John grounded Anne for the entire summer after ninth grade, mostly for talking back. She retreated into books, into drawing and sewing, but dinner happened every night. Em thought it was important to sit down as a family every night. No lie. Anne was already a big girl, but that summer she, too, gained weight, which really pissed her father off. So then there were diets. Every Sunday night she stood in her underwear on the scale and "weighed in" for her Dad. And for every pound she gained, she was grounded for another week. There was no escape.

"How much fabric did you have to round up?" Dad would joke when they came in the door with their bags. At the fabric store Anne could get kind of excited about the clothes. She wished she could sew in the privacy of her room and listen to records, but they weren't supposed to close their bedroom doors.

"Probably cheaper to buy a little dome tent and put a ruffle around the bottom."

"John," Em would say, threatening.

"Oh Em, can't the girl take a joke?"

They lived on the edge of town, up on the foothills, and there weren't that many kids around. Anne and Sam had grown up running around in the pastures and fields, lassoing alligator lizards with oatgrass and picking tomato hornworms off the vines up at the chicken farm. Later, in 4-H, she met Julie, who lived close enough to walk to her house. Anne had some friends at school, but that summer Anne relied on Julie, Sam, and Sam's idiot friend Don. The girls worked on their tans lying out on the patio, combed lemon juice into their towhee-brown hair to streak themselves coppery blond. Then Sam started screwing Julie in the afternoons before Em got home, and Anne was stuck playing cards with Don. There were no boyfriends. The boys at school were mostly still short and squeaky, and Anne loomed over them: opinionated, smart, and loud. Or completely silent. Outside class, for the most part, and definitely around boys (not counting Don, of course) she was speechless. She didn't hang around after school because her Dad gave her thirty minutes to get home. And her shoes were wrong. By the end of eleventh grade Anne had never been out with a boy.

On a summer visit with her cousins down in Orange County, Anne's Aunt Lena took her into Los Angeles to find her some pretty shoes. Lena bought her open-toed platform sandals,

white leather with an ankle strap. Anne made a long flowerchild dress out of sprigged white gauzy cotton, and she thought she looked pretty good. Not thin, but the long dress was flattering in a way Dittos definitely were not. It was very long. All that leg and the tall sandals: long. She was tan and streaky blond from lemon juice and lying out by Aunt Lena's pool. That summer, at an Allman Brothers concert with her older cousin and his friends, she got her first kiss, too, and she was sure it was the sandals and the blond streaks that clinched it.

Back in Santa Barbara Em looked wall-eyed at the outfit, but let it pass. On the first day of senior year Anne donned her new dress, her new sandals, and squared her broad shoulders. She had been kissed by a college guy. She wasn't a complete dork. Julie's mom honked to pick her up for school, and on her way out the door she heard her dad say, "turn around a minute?"

Anne turned around, her heart pounding.

"Where do you think you're going in those shoes?"

"I think I'm going to school. Julie's mom's here."

"You are going nowhere in those shoes. Double-cripple prostitute shoes." Her dad called platforms 'double-cripple' shoes. The prostitute thing was new.

"I gotta go, Dad."

"Not in those shoes. Only prostitutes wear open-toed shoes."

Anne walked out the door and got in the waiting car.

The real war began: gloves off, the both of them. And Em just stood there and let it happen.

John left just before Anne graduated. It was anticlimactic. Weirder was the odd calm in his wake. Sam and Anne and Em sat on the patio in the evenings in the unthreatening twilight, knowing no one was coming home from work loaded for bear, knowing dinner would just be about eating, that quiet would reign until bedtime, when they went to their rooms with their books and Mom had a last glass of wine.

For graduation Anne's grandfather gave her a trip to Japan. She stayed with two Lion's Club families, both with daughters around her age, each for a month. She was a complete freak. Japanese children dropped their toys and ran crying from the giant girl. The one English loan word everyone knew was 'jumbo.' But one of her host sisters took pleasure in styling her:

flipping her collar up, accessorizing, rolling her sleeves just so, persuading her to wear her pretty peignoir belted over a narrow skirt and bodysuit. Fumiko made Anne's eyes up in her own cosmetics, and took her to get her hair cut short. She said, "you're not fat. You have shape. You have breasts! Look at me." She pointed at her flat chest. "Every Japanese girl want your breasts." They giggled. "You know what I mean." Despite her considerable obsession with beauty and fashion, Em had never done anything like this, touching Anne's hair, stroking her face, tutoring.

Japan was fraught with exquisititude: it was almost anxiety-inducing. Anne was afraid to miss anything, unable to absorb enough. Perfect dew-colored melons, flawless dawn-pink peaches; delicious food masquerading as artful objects displayed on translucent pale gray-green plates; elegant clothes and intricate birdcages and graceful gardens and tea caddies and obis and shrines and calligraphy and peonies and – so much, so much pointless beauty. This seeming compulsion, the very pointlessness, the plenty, the care, just about broke Anne's suburban heart.

It was the year that JUN, a Japanese fashion house, went international. Gigantic, building-sized billboards of perfect Alain Delon and Veruschka in drag, photographed by Richard Avedon, strode and waved over Tokyo. JUN's sexually ambiguous posters were plastered on every shop window. Japan had already discovered Grace Jones. The tall, broad-shouldered Jamaican model had turned vampiress-disco-dominatrix, reigning over the Japanese imagination of foreignness, over LA's gay club scene. Anne's very perception of perception was blown apart by Japan, Avedon, and Jones. It was 1976. The world was surfacing from hippiedom, cutting its hair, shining its shoes. It was the year of Bowie's *Station to Station* and Bryan Ferry in Savile Row suits. On the Ginza with Fumiko Anne bought makeup, the iconic Maquillage Dior, and she returned to California in kabuki-face, armed with shoulder-pads and a knife-sharp pencil skirt.

Coming out of customs at LAX she actually scanned right past her mother at the gate. Em called out, waving. Anne scanned back – there she was: a slender, tanned woman with a mop of tangled dark curls, wearing a snug red sleeveless dress, tall red sandals. Anne hugged her mother close, crunching against the chunky Mexican folk jewelry stacked around her neck. The first thing she thought was *no breasts*.
