



FICTION

King of the Tyrant Lizards

Malerie Willens

Most mornings, Mia left Zander an inch of coffee. She'd brew a pot, start a crossword, and pour all but an inch into her commuter cup, slipping out to work while Zander pushed his luck with the snooze button. He felt hopeful that that day's fresh, full pot was a peace offering. He drank the coffee in birdlike sips because it inflamed his esophagus or diaphragm or whatever the reflux ads said it was, and tried to replay the events of the previous night. He was acidic inside and fuzzy with low-quality sleep. While he recalled isolated moments, there was no thesis, no clear message to take into the day.

Mia's six-year-old, Milo, kicked open some space for his sandaled feet amid the empty water bottles on the floor of Zander's car. The red subcompact looked like a jellybean, and it moaned when driven too fast. They zoomed quickly down the canyon, but speed was not an option in the flats as they lumbered through the stop and start of the morning commute. And while traffic barely moved, the Knee Jerk & Paco radio show agitated the car with rapid-fire chatter and warnings about the record heat. Zander reminded Milo to drink plenty of fluids and Milo asked if fruit punch counted.

"Fruit punch, lemonade, apple juice, soda, milk. Anything but beer," he said, reaching over to poke Milo in the ribs.

"What about water?"

"Sure. Water's best."

"Why?"

"Because it's pure."

"What do you mean by 'pure'?"

"I mean there's nothing bad in it."

"All those other drinks are bad for me?"

"No, Milo. But water's the healthiest."

"Then why didn't you just say to drink water?"

Zander considered this as they joined the caravan that snaked into the park.

"Because it's good to have choices," he said, slowing through the drop-off area, past the line of yellow buses. Milo waved at his counselor, who stood puzzled on the grass, waving back as they drove by. He twisted himself around in his booster seat, watching the buses and people get smaller through the back window.

"What are we doing? How come we're leaving?"

Zander wiggled his eyebrows and said nothing.

"But today's a field trip to the museum. They have a T-Rex!"

Zander shrugged twice, for theatrical effect.

"I know! You're taking me to work!" said Milo, eyes widening. He sang "Worky, worky, work-work" to the tune of "I'm a Little Teapot." Milo fancied the idea of a grown-up job, while Zander, a grown-up, did not and never had.

"No work today," Zander said as he merged onto the free-

way. He'd gotten wasabi on his keyboard a couple days earlier, and was in no mood for the IT guy's power trip. He knew he'd have to hear a speech about designated eating zones and the cost of office equipment, and then he'd be forced to sign a piece of pink paper: his second. Three pieces of pink paper and that was it.

"Would you like to be kidnapped?"

"Sure," said Milo.

Zander and Mia had argued the night before while getting ready to leave for a Dodgers game. Milo had already strapped himself into the backseat of the station wagon in the driveway next to the kitchen window, when Zander told Mia he was thinking of quitting his job and starting his own business. It was practically the Year 2000. More and more jobs were being digitized, and he wanted no part of it. It was time to take things in a new direction, or an old direction, as it were. What if he opened a small DVD rental shop limited to films made in the 1970s and set in California? He was a fan of their drab colors and overexposed landscapes, the murky morality, ambiguous heroes who didn't say much, the howling oddballs and endings that didn't feel like endings. He would find a cheap space in a strip mall on Riverside or Figueroa, with good parking, and, in the words of the Kinks (and before them the O'Jays) he'd give the people what they want.

The plan was to serve the interests of real movie aficionados who refused to let some sinister media conglomerate govern their entertainment. It was no accident that he'd lost touch with his tech-savvy friends who'd relocated up to San Jose and gotten too big for their britches, waxing poetic about this or that microchip and making the world a better place. Zander knew for a fact that nobody loved looking at videos on their computer, and feature-length films would be unwatchable over the internet, even if dial-up got its shit together or the whole broadband thing took off. Improving on the DVD was a fool's errand. Most people didn't know that the V in DVD stood for *versatile*. Digital Versatile Disc. Versatility is everything, if you want to adapt and survive. That's the DVD. Superior technology, sensitive yet sturdy, interactive, with a kick-ass data lifespan. It was obvious to Zander that dropping your DVD into a mailbox and then receiving a new one in the mail was an idea without legs. It lacked the human dimension that people crave. He understood innately that the real-time, flesh-and-blood retail experience would never go extinct. Why? Because it scratched a primal itch. Because we're social, deep down, and we need other animals. There is simply no substitute for face time, the human touch, the timbre of another voice. Soon, it would be Y2K and the

world would change. It might even end. But we'd never not be human.

"Do you have a business plan?" Mia asked him as he rummaged through the cabinet for the giant blue foam finger he liked to wave in the stands. "Do you have a time frame?"

He knew that *she* knew he had neither a business plan nor a time frame.

"It's half-baked, Zander," she said, pouring sunflower seeds into a sandwich bag.

"First off, it's not. Second, funny you should mention 'half' because I was thinking we could devote half the store to Southern California—*The Long Goodbye*, *Chinatown*, *Car Wash*, *Minnie and Moskowitz*—and the other half to Northern: *The Conversation*—"

"—*Harold and Maude*, *Play Misty for Me*, I get it."

Mia and Zander loved movies. Hollywood—its obscurest caste—was in their DNA. They both descended from below-the-line hourly-paid journeymen who were treated with relative indifference, and riddled with arthritis after toiling for decades to bring the dream to life. Mia and Zander loved to watch movies, to talk about movies, to make lists of old movies they still hadn't seen, but they'd long since dispensed with the fantasy of working in or around them.

"I worry though," said Zander, suddenly philosophical as he leaned back against the old stove. "In *Two-Lane Blacktop*, they go east pretty early. And with *Night Moves*, Hackman's in and out of LA, he's in New Mexico, the Keys. I suppose it still counts."

Mia's face became a mix of amusement and defeat. "Is this a joke, Zander? Are you joking?"

The rustic kitchen and woodsy canyon cottage felt cozy and welcoming to Zander when things were going well, claustrophobic and dank when they weren't.

"I'm just throwing it out there," he said as he slid the foam finger out of the knotty pine cabinet and up against the kitchen window where Milo could see. "It's hypothetical."

He waved the big finger at the little boy, who looked like a hand puppet as he thrust his torso out of the car's open back window. They pointed at each other—Zander with the foam finger and Milo with his own—mouthing the word "you" over and over. "You!" "You!" "You!"

"That's the problem," Mia said, her diminution in volume a kind of scream. "Everything's hypothetical. If it were just a dumb idea, that'd be one thing, but you'll never even know. You talk yourself out of everything."

"I do?"

"Yup. You do. I don't know if it's laziness, or fear, or what. You abandon things before you even start them."

"I haven't abandoned *you*."

WATER, WATER, EVERYWHERE...



Iconic scenes in the films *Grease*, *Terminator 2*, *Point Blank* and *Point Break* were all shot in the LA River.

The average Californian uses 31,000 gallons of water per year.

The average California golf course uses 90 million gallons per year.

THERE ARE 970 GOLF COURSES IN CALIFORNIA.

1,180 MILES

of aqueduct move water to the state's 69,600 farms and 13.16 million households from the northern mountains and the Colorado River.

California has the third-longest coastline in the United States, with 840 miles.



Lined up end-to-end, the estimated 250,000 swimming pools of Los Angeles County would stretch even farther.

The Los Angeles River only periodically reached the Pacific Ocean prior to 1825.

THE ESTIMATED WEEKLY EVAPORATION OFF THE AQUEDUCT COULD FILL ALL 250,000 OF LOS ANGELES COUNTY'S POOLS WITH OVER A BILLION GALLONS TO SPARE.



The last known native fish caught in the Los Angeles River was a rainbow trout, in 1948.

During the 1997-98 El Niño, 9,290 tons of trash washed into Long Beach Harbor. Prior to the installation of 12,000 storm drains along the LA River, items seen in the ocean included 30 foot logs, dead dogs, refrigerators, fresh oranges and lemons, befuddled rattlesnakes, millions of cigarette butts and Styrofoam "like white lilies."



California is authorized to take 1.5 trillion gallons from the Colorado River each year.

THE FIRST OFFICIAL SHORTAGE IN THE 99-YEAR HISTORY OF THE COLORADO RIVER COMPACT WAS DECLARED ON AUGUST 16, 2021.

The Colorado River hasn't regularly reached the Pacific Ocean since the 1960s.

CALIFORNIA HAS 27 DESALINATION PLANTS EITHER ONLINE OR IN DEVELOPMENT.

"That's true, but I feel like you could. Like you could just vanish."

"Really?"

"I know you think you stay with things too long."

"What things? What do you mean?"

"Jobs, girlfriends, cars, everything. Like you'd have avoided trouble if you'd seen the warning signs and left. You're always ready to cut your losses. Your timing's...paranoid. You won't let anything get good."

He wasn't going to try and dissect her accusations, not in the moment. He'd been with Mia for more than a year, yet her knack for pinpointing problems still jarred him. He'd be the first to admit that she understood him better than he understood her. She once compared him to a stock character, the aging dilettante whose optimism and *joie de vivre* were

magnetic until they weren't. It happened gradually, then suddenly. Your shtick got old, and so did you.

"You sleep here eight nights out of 10. You pay a grand a month for an empty apartment. Move in, save your money, find a job that doesn't kill you. You come home on your knees, and when *you're* on *your* knees, Milo and I are on *ours*. No man is an island, Zander. Not even you."

Three hours into the drive, they stopped for lunch at the diner on the summit of Cajon Pass. Zander called Mia from the payphone in the entryway while Milo slid quarters into the sex-o-meter.

"This is Mia," she said from her cubicle.

"It's me."

"Jesus, Zander. The camp called—"

“—Relax. We’re taking the day off.”

“The day off? You just decided this?”

“I thought I’d spend the day with Milo. I feel bad we missed the ballgame.”

Milo pressed his palm against the sex-o-meter’s pre-formed metal handprint. The red light finally stopped at “*insatiable*” and sirens began to squeal. A husky female voice cooed, “insatiable!”

“Are those sirens?” asked Mia.

“It’s the sex-o-meter—we’re at a diner. Milo, talk to Mom. Tell her you’re fine.”

“I’m fine, Mom. I’m insatiable. Zander’s kidnapping me.”

“That’s great, honey. Put him back on the phone.”

Milo gave Zander the receiver.

“I told you we’re fine.”

“Where are you?”

“We’re going to the movies. We’ll call later.”

They ate their sandwiches at the counter. “Blood!” said Milo as he dipped an onion ring in ketchup. He rolled his eyeballs back so that only the whites of his eyes showed, freezing the pose for several seconds before returning to normal.

“Zander? Why’d you tell Mom we’re going to the movies? We’re not, right?”

“Because if I told her where we were, she’d be worried.”

“She’d worry we’re eating lunch?”

“She’d worry that we’re far from home.”

“Are we going back?” asked Milo.

“Is that what you want to do?”

“No.”

“Then we’ll drive a little. But don’t tell people I’m kidnapping you.”

“How come, Zander?”

“Because kidnapping’s a bad thing. Bad people do it and I could get in trouble. And I’m not kidnapping you. We’re just spending some time together.”

“Then why’d you ask if I want to be kidnapped?”

“I really don’t know,” Zander said as he pushed away his plate. “Forget I said it, okay?”

“Okay, Zander.”

“And you don’t always have to call me ‘Zander.’”

“Then what do I call you?”

“You can call me ‘Zander,’ but you don’t have to say my name all the time. If it’s just us, I know you’re talking to me.”

They crested the pass, slaloming down and around the mountain. This was the steep beginning of the interstate route to Vegas. It was one of the few places in Southern California to accumulate real snow in winter, but Zander had only driven it in the summer heat. He imagined himself in

January, in aerodynamic clothing, skiing down the hill with the Vegas-bound tour buses and two-seater convertibles that were always in a hurry. He imagined the passengers waving him on, delighting in the spectacle until he disappeared from sight. They’d remember him later over a two-dollar shrimp cocktail, and flossing their teeth at his-and-hers sinks, and again in their starched hotel beds as they fell asleep to the slot-machine sounds still rattling in their ears.

“It’s sunny!” said Milo as the cloud cover broke. Every few feet, the same gnarled breed of cactus pierced the flatness. The uniformity of the desert meshed in rhythm with Milo’s zombie-like repetition of “my *tooth*...is *looth*...my *tooth*...is *looth*.”

“I don’t want you to worry, kiddo. We’re not doing anything wrong. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Sometimes it helps you think if you go somewhere new, look at different stuff.”

“What are we going to look at?”

“We don’t know yet. That’s part of the fun.”

“How do we know it’s going to help if we don’t know what it is?”

“Good question,” said Zander as he reached down around Milo’s feet, hoping to find some water in one of the bottles.

“I can’t answer that, but you need to trust me. I never lie to you, Milo.”

“I know.”

“Good.”

“That’s what Mom said.”

“What?”

“That you don’t lie.”

“She said that?”

“Yeah.”

“Does she talk about me a lot?”

“I don’t know.”

“What else does she say about me?”

“I can’t remember.”

“When did she say I don’t lie?”

“I can’t remember.”

“A long time ago or not so long ago?”

“Not so long ago.”

By mid-afternoon, they were far enough east to pick up mostly Ranchera, Country and faith-based radio. It was fine to take this small trip. None of Mia’s other boyfriends had been as close to Milo as he was. At least she’d know they were safe. She once told him that 40 percent of her feeling for him was the result of his affection for Milo, but that was after a bad fight.

They stopped in Sandoval, a dusty, slow-motion town with nearly as many bars as people. This one seemed unusually dark inside. Three old men were perched on barstools, watching the Rangers play the White Sox on TV. The wood grain and buzzy drone of baseball made the bar feel familiar. Zander and Milo sat across from the old men. The American League game might as well have been a soap opera for all Zander cared; he was strictly National League. It was good to feel neutral.

One of the three men had a bright white flattop and shoulders too square for someone with such a dissipated face. He tapped his pack of Lucky Strikes and removed the Zip-po from his shirt pocket with the flourish of someone who'd spent time in front of an audience. He lit a cigarette as though he hadn't heard, or didn't care, about the risks.

The sixty-something barmaid complained that the heat was melting her makeup. Her use of the word "rouge" sounded old-fashioned to Zander. He hadn't heard a woman say "rouge" since he was a kid. What was it called now? Blush? She dog-eared a page in a magazine with step-by-step instructions for recreating the hairdos of the rich and famous. She'd chosen the pert, auburn "Reba" for her date that night.

"These young players are showboats," said Flattop. "Hard hitting, soft thinking. No strategy. Whop it high, run the bases cocky, take the game out of the game. Cobb was the opposite. Cobb didn't slug. He hit for average. And he hated the heat," he said, ashing his cigarette with beefy fingers.

Zander watched Milo watch Flattop, an elderly man whose hands, torso and voice were all still big.

"On hot days like today," Flattop continued, "Cobb would put lettuce under his cap. Piece of wet lettuce, kept him cool all day. You need a cool head in baseball."

"A cool head?" said the barmaid. She removed the cigarette from Flattop's fingers, took a drag and then returned it. "Ty Cobb was an asshole. And crazy! Everyone knows *that*."

Zander wondered whether the lettuce in the cap had something to do with Cobb salad.

"She said 'asshole!'" Milo announced with a thrill.

"That's not where Cobb salad comes from, is it?" Zander asked.

"I never thought of that," said the barmaid. "Is it?"

"Is what?" asked Flattop, concentrating on the game.

"Is the Cobb salad named after Cobb?"

"Cobb didn't eat a shred of salad, I can tell you that. You don't get that kind of strength from salads."

The barmaid rolled her eyes. "It's got bacon in it," she said.

"Bacon, chicken, egg," said Zander. "It's a good salad."

"Cobb would've eaten that," she said.

"Go, go, go!" shouted Flattop and one of the other men.

Someone had hit a line drive, bringing in the go-ahead run for the Rangers. The White Sox manager sprinted over to the umpire at third, arguing the call, claiming the ball went foul. Within seconds, there were fingers in faces.

"Ball was fair," said Flattop, stubbing out his cigarette. He'd watched it carefully, he said, and it had stayed inside. He'd put money on the Rangers, and he needed the cash for his date that evening. Flattop winked at the barmaid.

"Sure as heck you do," she said.

So they were an item. Would they go to a different bar or stay there? Zander imagined them eating steaks served on wooden planks, somewhere just off the highway.

"Big date?" he asked the barmaid.

"Medium," she said, plunking down a fresh bottle of beer. "On the house," she said. "What about you? This your little boy?"

"Milo's my girlfriend's kid," he said, tousling Milo's hair, "but I pretend he's mine."

"He and my mom had a fight yesterday, so we couldn't go to the Dodgers."

"Sorry to hear that," said the barmaid. She arranged maraschino cherries and green olives on a saucer and placed it in front of Milo.

"What are these?" he asked, rolling an olive between his fingers.

"Olives," said Zander. "You like olives."

Milo dropped the olive into his mouth and within seconds spat it back into his hand. "Ah-ah-ah! My tooth!"

"Is it out?" asked Zander.

"It hurts!" He opened his mouth. Zander looked in and saw the tiny incisor still attached.

"Why didn't you say it had a pit?" asked Milo, the half-chewed olive now in his palm.

"I thought you knew. You eat olives all the time."

"I eat black ones, Zander. They have holes. These have pits."

The barmaid plucked the spitty green matter out of his hand with a napkin. He buried his face in Zander's arm, suddenly shy.

"Big fight?" the barmaid asked.

Zander took a long pull from the bottle. "Medium," he smiled, distracted by the rustling of wallets and bills and "yeah!" and "dammit!" coming from the old men across the bar.

"I sort of wish she didn't know me so well. But I also love that she does, you know?"

"Double-edged sword," said the barmaid.

TUBULAR LINGO

“Slang is not the sign of a degeneration of the tongue. It is a development of expression which enriches rather than cheapens the language.”

—Prof. G. R. Potter, University of California, 1927

amped [AMPT] *adj*: excited, energetic; as in “that tweaker is hella amped.” Probably from 1970s American drug lingo, a play on amphetamine.

Angeleno or Angelino [AN-JUH-LEE-NOH] *n*: a native or inhabitant of Los Angeles. Even city documents will mention implementing changes for Angelenos. From American Spanish *Angeleno*.

dip [DIP] *v*: to peace out, scam, jet or GTFO; as in “I gotta dip.” From the San Francisco Bay Area.

dude [DOOD] *n*: a term of address that can be used for literally anything, animate or inanimate, of any gender; as in “dude, you’re a slow microwave.”

Originally from late 1800s America, meaning a conspicuously well-dressed person or an urban person in a rural location, surfers co-opted the word to mean any guy.

gnarly [NAHR-LEE] *adj*: excellent, sweet, sick or rad; as in “the surf is gnarly today, brah!” From California surfers, now ubiquitous.

grip [GRIP] *n*: an amount too large to count, a buttload; as in “that’s a grip of coins you got there.” Possibly from hustlers counting cash by how much would fit between thumb and index finger.

hella [HEL-UH] *adv*: very; as in “this sushi burrito is hella good.” From Oakland, possibly as early as the 1970s. The

Oxford English Dictionary suggests it’s derived from “helluva” or “hellacious.”

June gloom [JOON GLOOM] *n*: the cloudy, foggy weather California is prone to in June, caused by condensation from a still-cool Pacific Ocean; as in “This June gloom is bumming me out.”

no yeah [NOH YAH] *adv*: agreement; as in “no yeah, sounds hella gnarly.”

the 5 (*or any freeway*) [THUH FAHYV] *n*: freeways in Southern California are all referred to this way; as in “Take the 101 to the 5 to the 10, unless there’s traffic; then stay on the 210.” The *the* is an artifact of the names SoCal freeways had before a formalized numbering system was implemented, like “The Harbor Freeway” or “The Grapevine.”

Milo began kicking his feet back and forth, making the bar thump.

“Stop kicking,” said Zander.

“I’m not,” he said, continuing to kick.

“Stop it!”

“I can’t help it. This is where my feet are.”

“Of course you can help it.”

“No I can’t.”

Milo sat up straight and looked directly at the barmaid.

“I’m being kidnapped.”

“Why’d you say that? Damn it, Milo. I told you not to call it that.”

“It’s not true,” Zander told the barmaid. “I was kidding when I said it. He doesn’t know what it means.”

“Better not be true,” she said, part amused, part concerned. “Where you headed from here?”

“We’re just driving. We’ll turn back in a bit.”

“We might go to Las Vegas,” said Milo.

“Vegas?” said the barmaid. “Isn’t it illegal to take someone else’s kid over the state line without consent? I could be wrong, but I think that’s the law.”

“Milo’s just grumpy. He’s trying to provoke us.”

“I’m not grumpy. I’m getting bored.”

The barmaid cocked an eyebrow, took possession of her hairstyle magazine and drifted across the bar to Flattop, who was watching highlights of the game that had just ended.

Billboards advertising Vegas’s cheapest prime rib and loosest slots began to appear on the sides of the highway. Bow-tied women in poker visors, croupiers in striped silk vests and Oilcan Harry gents in top hats lured drivers with Wild West fin de siècle conviviality. There were belly dancers, bearded wizards, snake charmers, celebrity impersonators, gladiators, mimes, showgirls in feathers, and exotica not indigenous to the desert: White Bengal Tigers, Chilean flamingoes, penguins from the Arctic and a tropical rainforest with

a thousand bromeliads and seventeen kinds of orchid. The idea people had globe-trotted and time-traveled, bringing all manner of hyperbole together on a thin strip of desert land: the world's largest permanent circus, a Venetian-style canal with gondola rides, imported reproductions of Romanesque marble statuary, sealed water samples from Lourdes, Europe's top pastry chefs, simulations of New Orleans' Mardi Gras, Rio's Carnivale and the volcano at Pompeii, replicas of the Sistine Chapel's ceiling and King Tut's tomb, plus hourly pirate ship battles produced by the pyrotechnics crew behind the closing ceremony of the Nagano Olympics.

Milo yawned. "Tell me a story from your mouth."

He could read, but he preferred Zander's made-up scenarios to the ones in his books, most of which he'd memorized.

"Not now. We'll miss the thermometer," said Zander, who was undecided about Vegas. He figured they'd stop in Baker at the World's Tallest Thermometer, and he'd come up with a plan. He thought about the cool, reconstituted casino air, the click of the roulette wheel. He saw the ball bounce and pop, settling on red. He thought he might book a room, tell Milo a story to put him to sleep, and then restrict himself to three hours downstairs. Three hours, a few hundred dollars, nothing anyone would remember in a year.

"A thermometer," said Milo. "Like when I'm sick?"

"Bigger. Way bigger. It's a hundred and something feet tall. That's the hottest it's been here: a hundred and something degrees."

Zander knew the route well. His father, a muckety-muck in the craps world, had taken him and his mother and brother on yearly trips through California, to Nevada towns that weren't famous. He said the odds were better than in Vegas, where he refused to go because of some inferred humiliation from way back. The four of them would sing "Tie a Yellow Ribbon 'Round the Ole Oak Tree" and Todd Rundgren's "I Saw the Light" as the russet metallic Cutlass sped them through the desert, or up along the edges of Sequoia and Yosemite, where they grazed forest and lakes, and mountains sometimes capped with snow, admiring them from a distance without ever stopping to visit. The enormous thermometer had stood watch since the early '90s over Baker, a desolate town with weather so hot it was almost funny. Phony signposts marked the distance to Cairo, Taipei and São Paulo, and a Grecian-themed café served lamb shanks and sticky desserts.

Zander thought about Mia as twilight dimmed the highway. Mia, who lately seemed more serious, more distracted. In their first months together, they took a lot of baths together. She would scrub his shoulders with a loofa while they free-associated. She'd always wanted to learn Portuguese,

she said. "It sounds like velvet feels." The bath was where she'd dream and plan: to take bass guitar lessons, to make jam with her neighbors' unwanted loquats, to volunteer with Governor Davis's office, to raise awareness about the unconstitutionality of Prop 187. Zander had been telemarketing for a company that sold talking doorbells to Walmarts across the Southeast. "*Welcome!*" "*Bless This Mess!*" "*No solicitors or take-out menus, please!*" It was in the bath that Mia had encouraged him to find something better. At night and on weekend mornings, they'd linger in the tub in bobsled formation, her back against his chest. Other times, they'd face each other, Zander with the metal faucet jabbing his back, trying but failing to pleasure Mia with his big toe.

They exited the freeway at Baker and parked at a coffee shop with a view of the big thermometer. Its vertical strip of white light represented mercury, illuminating the landscape *Close Encounters*-style. It was 94 degrees.

They read their menus in a booth by the window until a waiter appeared.

"What if I want breakfast foods?" asked Milo.

"Get breakfast foods."

"But it's dinner."

"What do you want?"

"Toast and Cheerios."

"That's bread and bread. How about toast and an egg?"

"Okay. But not a runny egg," Milo said, slamming his menu shut.

"He'll have an egg, over hard, and wheat toast," said Zander. "Patty melt for me."

"Can I call Mom?"

"After we eat."

Milo put his head down on the Formica table then immediately raised it back up.

"Has Mom ever been here?"

"To the thermometer?"

"Yeah."

"I don't think so. She's not a big fan of the desert."

"How come?"

"Too dry, I guess. Not green. She likes the mountains. And the ocean. But not lakes. Too slimy on the bottom."

"I like deserts, mountains, oceans and lakes," Milo said. "Did you know that California's the only state with all of them?"

"I did not know that."

As soon as the waiter brought their food, Milo poked his fork into solid egg yolk. "Glad it's not runny."

They ate quietly, bathed in the thermometer's synthetic shine, until Milo froze midway through a bite of toast. He

opened his mouth over his plate, and let a tiny, bloody tooth drop onto his egg.

"Congratulations!" said Zander.

Milo looked confused at Zander's excitement. This object on his plate had just been attached to him, a part of his body. He cried while Zander walked him to the bathroom, where he rinsed his mouth, blew his nose into a wad of toilet paper, and eventually caught his breath.

"I shouldn't have ate breakfast at dinnertime," Milo said, back at the booth. "I wish I got a hamburger."

"You'd still have lost your tooth. It's been dangling. It was time."

"I want Mom," he said, looking small and frightened, like someone else's kid, for the first time all day.

"I do too, Milo. Who would like some chocolate pudding?"

"Me," said the boy, lower lip protruding, eyes cast down.

Zander figured that the loss of his first tooth, and the long, hot drive, must have made the world seem vast and unruly against the compact geography and the errand-running, day-camping, bedtime-avoiding units of time that normally shaped his life. They shared a dish of pudding while Milo's sandaled feet kicked around under the table. Zander wrapped the tooth in a napkin and pocketed it for later.

Back in the car, Milo applied pressure with a tissue to the hole in his mouth. Zander rolled down his window halfway, making the wind whip. "Try to find a license plate from every state."

"It's too dark. I can't see."

"Stay focused, kid. We're nearly in Nevada."

"Do they have T-Rex in Nevada?"

"Not anymore. I bet you don't know what T-Rex means in English."

"What do you mean 'in English'?"

"T-Rex is a Latin nickname. The English translation's really cool."

"What's Latin?"

Zander twiddled the radio knob, hoping to find the Dodgers game they were missing, again. They'd gone to one a month earlier, and left during the seventh inning stretch because Milo had fallen asleep after a long day. Traffic on the 101 sent them on a southern detour and they decided to keep going, all the way down to Wilshire, named for a Socialist millionaire, to see the neon signs that were finally relit after being dark since World War II. Milo stirred occasionally but stayed mostly asleep as they drove the boulevard that had been a pathway for the thriving Tongva before the Spanish came. By the early twentieth century, real-estate

players were calling it the Fifth Avenue of the West, and LA's Champs-Élysées. Like so much in the city, it was grand and then ungrand, then revitalized in part, the new grandeur laying strangely over the dirt and disorder of recent history. But the new-old neon signs, which were also being relit heading north into Hollywood, were striking to see from the foothills and from different vectors around town, high enough on the rooftops of theaters, hotels and apartment buildings to make the low-rise sprawl seem almost cohesive. The neon, in its spectrum of colors and scripts, the regal-sounding building names, made Zander think of Philip Marlowe, the bustle of progress, fancy ladies overdressed for the weather.

The city was quiet, the car silent in the wake of the stadium roar. This was the closest Mia had been to the signs, which lit the sparsely peopled boulevard as they drove west. She kicked off her sandals and stretched her legs out onto the dashboard, glancing back to check on Milo. Her feet were flat, wide, calloused, and to Zander, curiously erotic. Either she didn't think that she had busted-up feet, or she knew but didn't care. Zander found the whole thing exhilarating. It was as if the full measure of struggle and worry in her life had been annexed to her flawed, human feet.

"What's Latin? When'll it stop hurting?" Milo was moving his jaw in circles.

"Soon."

"How many more will I lose?"

"You've got thirty-one left," said Zander, trying to sound casual. "Next time it'll be a piece of cake."

"But I love cake!"

"No, silly. Next time it won't hurt as much."

"When will I lose the next one?"

"Could be in a month, could be next year."

"Will I still know you?"

"When you lose your next tooth?"

"When I lose all of them. Where will *you* be?"

Zander felt the havoc burn his throat, making him wish for Tums. He swerved across two lanes so they'd make the next exit, then past a neon Ferris wheel that marked the approaching state line. They wound around the off-ramp, behind a rattling 18-wheeler that looked as though it might come apart. They parked at a payphone beneath a massive video screen that televised a plate of waffles and a steaming cup of coffee, dwarfing the people in transit.

"You'll know me forever, dodo," he said. "'Til I'm so old I lose *my* teeth."

"Okay, dodo," said Milo.

He couldn't not call Mia. "The tooth," she would say. "I

missed the tooth!” This could go one of two ways. Either she’d be pro-Zander because he was there for the milestone—proof of his commitment to her and to Milo—or she’d resent him for stealing a moment that should’ve been hers. The machine came on at the house, and she didn’t answer her cell. Maybe she was driving home from work. Zander decided that it was time to get a cell phone. He’d do it as soon as he was back in LA. Mia would appreciate the gesture, and it would be easier to launch his business if contractors and lenders could reach him at all hours.

Inside the small reception area at the Motel Calivada, Milo grabbed every tourist pamphlet he could reach from the revolving display while they waited for someone to appear. A man with glossy black hair, presumably the night manager, swung open a brocade drape. His nametag said *Manoj R.: Bangalore, India*. Zander had only seen this in and around Vegas, where name-and-birthplace were pinned onto the chest of every hospitality worker, presumably to make visitors feel welcome while giving these tatty towns the sheen of a global village. At what point in the desert did people in the service industry start identifying themselves this way? Manoj clicked a remote control, animating the lobby with Indian pop music.

“We’d like a room. Far from the ice machine, if possible.”

“No problem,” said Manoj, beginning the business of cash and keys. “Are you en route to Vegas?”

“We’re not sure. We’re playing it by ear,” said Zander.

“I don’t want to pry, but you might wish to visit some of the attractions in Calivada. It’s charming in a way that Vegas once was, back in the day. You’ve got the good life right here, if you know what I mean.”

Their room was austere, with two twin beds, a television and a small coffee pot on a bureau.

“Here’s your tooth. Put it under your pillow.”

“But we’re not home,” said Milo.

“So?”

“The tooth fairy doesn’t come if you’re in a different state.”

“Who told you that?”

“Me. I told myself.”

“That’s not true. The tooth fairy always finds you.”

“Even if I’m in outer space?”

“What do you know about space?”

“That it’s far.”

“She could find you in outer space. Anyhow, we’re still in California, by a hair.”

“I love California,” said Milo, somersaulting into a tumble off the side of the bed.

“Oh yeah? Why’s that?”

“Because I do.”

“Good answer. I need to buy cigarettes. Will you close your eyes and try to rest?”

“Only if the TV’s on. Can we call Mom when you come back?”

“If it’s not too late. Else we’ll call her in the morning.”

Milo put his tooth under his pillow and wiggled himself under the covers. Zander slid a dollar out of his wallet and sneaked it under his own pillow, figuring he’d switch it with the tooth when Milo was asleep. He pinched his left forearm, which helped him remember things, kissed Milo’s forehead and turned the TV on and the lights off.

He walked the outside corridor to the landing at the staircase and stood against the railing, looking out. He’d forgotten how dark it got in the desert. It was the kind of darkness that reduced and expanded distances, making you feel tiny, then giant. He knew what she’d say when he called. That he was trying to reclaim his youth by hijacking his little sidekick and being boys on the lam, or she’d call it some symbolic last hurrah. Or maybe she’d just be angry with him for smuggling Milo into the desert, even though they didn’t really go anywhere or do anything.

He walked around the motel, past the office and motor court, a chained-up former gas station and a dumpster, and then he did it again and a third time, thinking the momentum might energize him. He stopped at a patch of astroturf near the parking lot and inhaled a sharp, clean hit of air, then kicked the dirt and watched it swirl. It was hard to concentrate in all that deep, dark space. He’d call Mia in the morning when his mind was clear.

He climbed back up the stairs with legs still rubbery from the drive, and walked the corridor back to the room. Milo appeared to be asleep. Zander clicked off the television and undressed in the dark, stifling the jangle of his belt buckle and pocket change. In bed, it was quiet, except for the whirr of cars on the interstate. Zander had the sense that he was forgetting something, but he often felt that way. He lay on his back like human scissors, arms at his sides, legs spread apart, trying to remember what he’d forgotten. He closed his eyes, enjoying the feel of the stiff bedspread grazing his chin. He made a rough plan for the next day. First, he’d put the kibosh on Vegas, another of his half-baked ideas. Next, they would check out of the motel, at which time he’d buy himself and Milo matching Calivada baseball caps from Manoj. Then they’d drive into town to a grocery store for a head of lettuce—romaine, iceberg, any lettuce—and they’d stick a few leaves in their caps, for cool heads on the ride home. ✱