



GREGORY D. WILLIAMS

OPEN
HEART

“Greg Williams is a
terrific writer!”

—RON CARLSON

*A poignant and gripping historical novel
about the enduring power of love*

Praise for Gregory D. Williams

“In matters of the heart, a single lapse of judgment can prove fatal. In this wise and tender novel, a young man finds out if he can live up to his father’s reputation and his own expectations of himself. Greg Williams is a terrific writer!”

— RON CARLSON, author of the *At the Jim Bridger* and *Return to Lone Pine*

“In the tradition of great physician writers like Chekhov, William Carlos Williams, and Walker Percy, Dr. Greg Williams proves himself to be a master chronologist of both emotional and physical matters of the heart. With a diagnostician’s keen eye for telling details, he brings the novel’s scenes into vivid life. He shows his beautifully drawn characters the same empathy that I am sure he once showed his patients. Sharply honed as a scalpel, *Open Heart* is mesmerizing and profound, a superb novel that is guaranteed to bring pleasure and a deeper understanding of the human condition to those who read it.”

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“ . . . a story about the boundaries of love, and how terrifying it can be to face up to our own emotional shortcomings.”

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“ . . . a tale that holds both surprise and inevitability, and evokes laughter even as it veers into pathos and tragedy.”

— PETER SELGIN, judge of the *Arts and Letters Fiction Prize*

“...a gentle coming-of-age story that leaves readers wanting more, yet gives them a sense of comfort as they reach the end.”

— RABIA TANVEER, for Readers' Favorite

“From his physician father’s ability to save the day, which turns into an impossible legacy for his son to fulfill, to the career and love choices that create turbulence and complications in a son’s life, Gregory D. Williams does a fine job of capturing the changing options and challenges facing a young man who breaks others’ hearts because his own is being wrung by life circumstances and family ties.”

— DIANE DONOVAN, for *Midwest Book Review*

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*A poignant and gripping historical novel
about the enduring power of love*

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For Linda, the love in my life, my inspiration

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The silence is broken: into the nature
My soul sails out,
Carrying the song of life on his brow,
To meet the flowers and birds.

When my heart returns in the solitude,
She is very sad,
Looking back on the dead passions
Lying on Love's ruin.

I am like a leaf
Hanging over hope and despair,
Which trembles and joins
The world's imagination and ghost.

— YONE NOGUCHI

Chapter One

HELP



August 1965, Huntington Beach, California

YEARS BEFORE GENE would hold a girl's heart in the palm of his hand, at a time when love was still a singular thing, he lay awake, unable to push thoughts of the accident from his mind.

Eyes closed, he was picturing his father running full speed away from their station wagon, and then Gene heard a muffled cry. He whipped his head toward his older sister, curled up in the other bed. Amber light, slicing through a break in the motel room's curtains, cut across her back. "Suzanne?" he whispered. She didn't respond. Unlike him, she was finally asleep, her rhythmic breathing riding the distant, breaking waves. She had been crying earlier tonight. Gene could tell by the sniffing and the way her shoulders shook after she turned away.

Slipping from his bed, he tiptoed to the door separating their room from his parents' room and pressed his ear against the panel. His mother was crying. Not his father. Gene had never seen him cry. There was talking. He couldn't make it out. When he shifted to the other ear, his knee knocked against the door. He held his breath. Uh-oh. Footsteps. Gene jumped back into bed, pulled the covers up, and turned his head. The door creaked open. "Gene," his father whispered. "Gene, you okay?"

Gene played dead. But not really dead. He made sure his chest moved so his father knew he was okay. After the door clicked closed, he waited several minutes before he faced the brown stain on the popcorn ceiling. It looked like blood. He shut his eyes. Then shut them a little tighter.

Earlier, his father had said, *We're on vacation. Let's try to forget the whole thing.* But Gene couldn't. Eyes closed or eyes open, he couldn't stop reliving the day.

It had begun that afternoon. Gene rested in the far back of his parents' Chevy II station wagon as the vehicle sped west across the Arizona desert toward the beaches of southern California. The hum of tires on hot asphalt bled through the vehicle's frame, through the four-inch foam bed he'd helped his father fit precisely to the space, and through the green corduroy bedspread, which covered the foam. The vibration tickled his bones. Sometimes his bones ached at night. *Growing pains* his mother once assured him. He hoped so. He wanted to be bigger. He wanted to be older than eleven. Someday, he wanted to be just like his father.

For now, he'd like to be as old as his sixteen-year-old sister, although today their mother said she was acting like a sulking child. Suzanne flopped into the car at sunrise. During the breakfast stop in Wickenburg, she said she wasn't hungry. And now, despite having the whole bench seat to herself, she leaned her head against the window behind their father and pouted. She was missing a party at Saguaro Lake later tonight. All her friends would be there. But Gene knew this was about a boy. He'd seen Suzanne making out with Rodney in the backyard by the orange trees. At night, Gene sometimes exited his second-floor bedroom window to the slanted roof below. There, if the conditions were just right, he could pull in the San Francisco Giants play-by-play on the Heathkit short-wave radio he and his father had built.

This roof-top privilege came with stipulations, one of which he broke on occasion by venturing onto the roof after his parents were in bed. The hours after midnight felt like a place beyond his horizon. He had yet to stay

up all night, but the night he made it to one thirty was the night he discovered a clear line-of-sight to Suzanne and Rodney kissing in the backyard. He had no intention of squealing. He would like to be Rodney, but of course not with his sister.

Cool air from the air conditioner flowed between his parents, over Suzanne's seat-back, and settled onto his face and thin, bare arms. Gene drifted on the vibration and the A/C's drone.

"You kids have to pee?" his mother said. "Rest stop one mile."

"No," Gene said.

"Suzanne?"

"I guess not."

"You could get a Butterfinger from the machine."

Suzanne didn't answer.

Gene touched the ceiling with his fingertips. The sun, hidden from view, rained its heavy heat through the hood of the wagon. He sat up and squinted south across the barren, thirty-foot median. For as far as he could see, maybe a hundred miles to the gray, jagged mountains, an army of saguaros flexed their arms to the cloudless sky. His father called this *no man's land*. Which was why Gene's space in back was crowded with a thermos of water, a Craftsman toolkit, jumper cables, two gallons of antifreeze bungeed together, and a plastic crate loaded with motor oil, flares, belts and hoses, and of course his father's black doctor's bag. The bag held a stethoscope, bandages, a plastic box labeled *Suture Kit* in block script on a piece of surgical tape, and an instrument his father said he used in the operating room everyday called a laryngoscope.

He'd helped his father load the wagon the day before, placing a tick by each checklist item with a carpenter's pencil. Then his father closed the rear hatch and said, "I think we're covered." Gene liked the *we're* part of that. On a trip last summer, somewhere in the desert near Blythe, he'd helped pack icy-wet rags around the steaming carburetor. They were treating

something called *vapor lock*. “It’s the same as when air gets inside your heart,” his father said. Gene had nodded as if he understood.

“Look at that,” his mother said. “One hundred and three and it’s not even noon.” She tapped the dial on the gauge he and his father had installed. Gene rolled his eyes, lay back down, and lip-synced her next words: “This is my last summer in Arizona.”

“You know,” his father said. “I’m putting that on your gravestone.”

“Carl, I’m serious.”

A gust of wind buffeted the car and the thermos rolled into Gene.

“That was a big one,” his mother said.

Gene set the thermos upright and braced it with the doctor bag. He opened the bag’s mouth a smidgen and inhaled. Something about the hospital smell pleased him.

“I changed my mind,” he said. “I have to pee.”

“Too late,” his mother said. “We just passed the exit.”

“Who’s that?” his sister said.

Her voice was different. Gene sat up and followed Suzanne’s concerned gaze out the window. A woman in a yellow sundress raced back and forth along the median. She tugged at her raven-black hair as the wind whipped her dress. She appeared to be screaming.

“There’s someone on the ground!” Gene’s mother said. She turned the music off.

They zipped by so fast, Gene didn’t see the person on the ground. But he kept his eyes on the woman as the station wagon slowed, jostled across the scrubby median, and picked up speed again. As they approached the scene, Gene noticed a white pickup truck parked off the shoulder on the right. The driver’s door was open. He looked back for the woman. She was kneeling over the person on the ground. Suddenly she ran away with her hands on her head as if something had bitten her.

Gene’s mother screamed. “Oh my God. Carl. It’s a child!”

Suzanne shrieked.

They passed a Cadillac canted in the median. An elderly woman in the front seat held a towel or shirt or something on the driver's face. The station wagon skidded to a stop just past the Cadillac. Gene caught himself against the back seat. His father bolted from the car. He ran across the hardscrabble earth toward the child, a bouncing tumbleweed crossing his path. Gene had never seen his father run like that — his arms pumping in his white t-shirt, the soles of his favorite traveling Hush Puppies kicking gravel and plumes of dirt high behind him. He ran about twice the distance as from home plate to second base, and with his back to Gene, knelt next to the child. A man in a black cowboy hat was already crouched there. Gene's father must have said something, because the man ran toward the rest stop across the highway.

Gene's father leaned down. Gene couldn't see his father's face or the child's, but he was sure he was breathing into the child's mouth. A couple years before, in their living room, he'd taught Gene and Suzanne how to do this. He had them practice on each other. Now, his father seemed to push on the child's body. It was hard to tell. He could only see the child's foot and pink sock.

"It's a girl," Gene said. "I think she had the wind knocked out of her." It had happened to him once. He thought the pushing might be another way to help her breathe.

After several seconds his father leaned over the girl again. The pattern repeated — breathing, pushing, breathing, pushing. Over and over and over. Gene grabbed the doctor bag and crawled across the seat back, nudging his sister aside. He pulled up on the door handle.

"No! Stay here." His mother's face was twisted.

"What if he needs this?"

"Stay."

Gene rolled down the window. The heat curled into the car like a wave. Other cars had stopped. People were shouting and running, while others stood around Gene's father, protecting their faces from gusts of sandy wind. Everyone looked confused. Several feet away, the woman in the yellow sundress was on her knees. She threw her head back and screamed again. Another woman ran to her.

Suzanne was crying. "Please, please, please."

His father continued: breathing, pushing, breathing, pushing. It went on and on as more cars stopped, but nobody helped his father. They stood or they knelt, but he was doing all the work. Was he getting tired? Maybe he needed some water. The cowboy-hat man ran back from across the highway. His hat flew from his head and tumbled across the desert. He was waving his arms and shouting. "They're coming," he said. He was so out of breath he could barely speak. The man bent over and vomited. Gene said, "Gross," and briefly closed his eyes. The girl still wasn't moving, but he was sure that at any moment she would sit up and take a deep breath just like he had done. Why wasn't anyone helping? Maybe he could do the breathing.

Finally, his father stopped. He rested back on his heels.

In a voice Gene had never heard from his mother, a voice balanced on a thin wire, she said, "Oh God, no. Please. No." She put her hand over her mouth. Her eyes were wet.

"He needs help," Gene said. He grabbed the doctor bag and thermos, vaulted over the seat, and opened the passenger-side door. His mother screamed his name. He ran as fast as he could with the heavy load jerking his arms. He was almost there, when his father turned and shouted. "Gene. Stop."

Gene obeyed, as much from the odd tone of the command as from the command itself. "Stay right there." His father said this calmly, stood, and

trudged over to Gene. He knelt and took the thermos and bag from his hands. “Let’s go back,” his father said.

Gene looked past his father to the girl. Below her cutoffs, her bare legs resembled question marks. One foot had a white sneaker; the other, only a pink sock. Her tattered yellow shirt laid open, and her chest was flattened. Except for smudges of blood around her mouth, her face was the color of an eggshell. One eye was half-open.

His father grasped Gene’s waist and gently turned him away. Gene looked at him for several hard seconds — at the smudge across one lens of his black-framed glasses (his father’s flip-up shades were missing) and at the sweat blooming across his forehead and dripping off his nose, but mostly at the blood drying within the morning stubble above his lip and on his chin. His father swiped his mouth and looked at the blood on his fingers. He poured water from the thermos and wiped his face, hands, and glasses. He took off his sweat-soaked t-shirt and used it to wipe his chest. “Here, take this.” He rolled up the shirt. “Take this and the thermos back to the car. I’ve got to check on her mother.”

Again, Gene looked past his father at the girl. Someone had covered her with a beach towel, but the wind tossed it aside. Gene’s shoulders began to shake. His whole body shook and the tears that erupted seemed as far from his control as the shaking.

His father pressed Gene’s cheek to his waist. “It’s okay,” his father said. “It’s okay.” The steady rub of his father’s thumb against his head and the gentle, deep voice slowed Gene’s breathing. Then, with a hand firmly on Gene’s shoulder, his father walked him back toward the station wagon.

Gene wiped his eyes. He looked up and squinted against the harsh sun glinting off his father’s head like a halo. “Dad,” he said. “I feel — ”

Then everything went dark.

Chapter Two

THE HEART ROOM



Summer 1974, Phoenix, Arizona

DAMN. He's going to be late. Gene glances up to his rear-view mirror and accelerates his yellow Jeep ten miles past Central Avenue's posted limit. He's practically the only car on this normally busy thoroughfare at...he checks his watch...5:07 a.m. The light at Camelback turns yellow... damn...he stops. Damn. Damn. Irene, Dr. Harrington's private scrub nurse told Gene on the phone last night, practically threatened him, not to be late. "It's not like baseball," she said. "With Dr. Harrington, one strike and you're out."

He's supposed to meet Irene by the scrub sink outside the open-heart room by five thirty. This job was a favor. Actually, it's a volunteer opportunity to shadow Dr. Benjamin Harrington until August, a man Gene's father called the *godfather of open-heart surgery in Arizona*. Normally the only outsiders allowed in the Heart Room were fifth-year surgical residents from Tucson. That Gene, a soon-to-be junior in college, had been granted this opportunity had everything to do with genetics.

On the Jeep's radio, KCAZ's disk-jockey introduces the next tune — "Only Love Can Break Your Heart." Gene shakes his head. The whole world must be conspiring to ruin this day. He turns up the volume and

recites the lyrics in his head, something he couldn't have done before Love-You-With-My-Whole-Heart Patty McLellan cut out his with a weed whacker last spring. But it isn't just this song. Every song seems to tell his story of love, loss, and longing.

The light turns green, and Gene floors it. Up ahead the lights are timing out perfectly. He might be a couple minutes late...okay maybe more than a couple...but being Carl Hull's son is sure to buy him a little time.

Then a red bulb between the speedometer and tachometer lights up. Gene slumps in the Jeep's bucket seat. He might just be back to painting the trunks of orange trees this summer. "Damn."

He slams the steering wheel with his open palm. The steam curling around the hood evaporates his imagined, glowing letter-of-rec from Dr. Harrington. So much for medical school.

Gene angles into the parking lot of Karsh's Bakery and unlatches the hood. A dripping hose dangles next to the water pump. Why now? Why today? The bakery door is locked. He pounds on the glass, but nobody comes. A mile down, a Union 76 station lights the dawn. Gene's hard-sole shoes clack along the sidewalk as he runs. A blond, curly-haired kid is opening up the small office. Not the owner, Jerry.

"Hey," Gene says. His chest heaves. From behind the counter, the kid startles. "Sorry. You got a clamp for a water hose? '65 Jeep."

"Gimme a sec."

The kid fiddles with a ring of keys, testing them one by one on the cash register.

"I'm kind of in a hurry," Gene says.

The kid doesn't speak. He shakes his head and saunters into the bay.

Gene taps his fingers on the counter. Come on. Come on.

The kid returns with five clamps. "One of these might work."

"What do I owe you?"

"Come back with the others and we'll settle up."

Gene turns to run back but stops. “Can I use your phone?”

The operator connects him with Desert Valley’s switchboard.

“Surgery, please,” Gene says.

“You mean the OR desk?”

“Yes, I guess. I’m looking for Irene. She works with Dr. Harrington.”

“Excuse me. Are you a physician?”

“No. I’m Gene Hull. I’m supposed to meet her there today and — ”

“Dr. Hull’s son?”

“Yes.”

“Please hold.”

The line is busy.

He calls back. The operator connects again. Still busy. Gene slams the receiver down. “Sorry.”

“Hey, don’t stress, man.” The kid plops a two-gallon kitchen pail onto the counter. “Radiator water’s by the last pump.”

“I owe you.” Gene runs back to his Jeep, water sloshing onto his cuff and shoe. He slithers under the Jeep. “Shit!” How could he forget? A screwdriver.

He rifles through the back of his Jeep and his glove box. Nothing. His father always had at least a small set of tools in the car. Not Gene. He left his in the garage. Think. Think. Run back to the gas station? He looks up. The distant light deflates him. Think. A dime. He checks the ash-tray. No dime. But maybe the penny. Working mostly by feel in the dim light, the third clamp he tries fits. Thank you. The penny fits as well. He tightens the screw as best he can, but the penny slips, and he fries the meat of his hand on the engine block. “Shit!”

He pours a little water onto his hand and the rest into the open mouth of the radiator. Without a funnel, some of it steams off the engine. It will have

to do. He tosses the other four clamps on the seat and wipes his hands with an old rag stained with tree-white.

GENE SCREECHES into Desert Valley Hospital a nose behind the sun. He parks in the staff lot adjacent to the muscular cooling plant which, even at first light, rumbles and hisses, sending swirling columns of steam into the dry, tepid air. He angles into a space close to the coolers. Their shadow, as long and wide as a gymnasium, will delay the sun's inescapable intrusion upon the canopy-covered cockpit of his Jeep. Still, by late afternoon, the steering wheel will be hot as a skillet.

He races across the asphalt and slows as he reaches the back entrance. When he steps on the rubber mat, the electric doors swing out with a hiss. Still the same.

Gene is familiar with the hospital's six-story layout. So many Sunday evenings he waited in the lobby while his father made pre-op rounds. Never, in all those years or after, did Gene venture inside an operating room, much less the Heart Room.

He quick-steps down a gleaming, windowless tiled corridor which bends right, a space he remembers as being larger and louder, crowded with people in street clothes or white coats, a din of conversations bouncing off the walls. Now, at this hour, his shoes click and echo along the cream-colored linoleum. The service elevator is just around the corner near the kitchen. Clanging of dinnerware and muffled, good-natured banter permeates the hall, as well as the odd aroma of bacon and rubbing alcohol.

He presses the elevator's UP button in rapid succession until he hears the carriage mechanism's stark whine. Beginning with six, the red numerals above the door count down as the carriage makes its maddeningly slow descent.

Irene told him on the phone: “There’s a chance this may not work out. A lot depends on you and, unfortunately, on Dr. Harrington’s mood on any given day.” She went on to explain that the previous spring the assistant administrator’s son arranged to observe a case one day. They’d just opened the chest when the kid walked in. Without looking up, Dr. Harrington said, “Son, perhaps your father has some menial office task you might perform that does not require punctuality. Have a nice day.”

The elevator dings, drawing Gene’s eyes to the lit numeral one. There is a pause, a silent moment when Gene’s heart almost stops. It just has to open. But the carriage whines and ascends...two, three, four...

“Damn!”

HE EXITS the stairs to the fourth floor, pulling air liked he’d just finished a set of first-to-third sprints. A corridor leads north and south to patients’ rooms. On the east side of this intersection, the rising sun beats against the reflective coating of a large picture window centered in the alcove’s waiting area. Across the corridor, double glass doors lead to the operating rooms. The lettering on the glass is still the same — *Operating Room Attire Only*. He walks around to the left of the electric doors to a small window and taps lightly to get the attention of a woman dressed in scrubs and shower-style cap. A bead of sweat trickles down his chest. She has her back to him and is chatting with someone else, a man similarly dressed, who seems upset about the workings of a long instrument the size of barbecue tongs. He tips his chin toward Gene, and the woman turns around in mid-yawn. She slides the window open and grins.

“So, what happened?”

Gene dressed as his father would have — slacks, short-sleeve dress shirt, and tie. But they’re a grimy mess now. “Radiator hose.”

“Eugene? Right?”

“Gene.”

“Irene’s been asking about you.”

“Did surgery start already?”

“Harrington cuts at seven.” She spins around and looks at the clock. It’s not quite six. “Irene’s been here since five thirty.”

Gene’s father usually left for work at about five forty-five. At least that was the time on the bedside clock when he opened an eye to the touch of his father’s hand on his forehead and aroma of his cologne.

“My God, you have your father’s good looks. More hair, though. I’m Darlene.”

She extends her hand, but Gene holds up his dirty mitts and shrugs. “Sorry.”

“We were devastated. Everyone loved him.”

“Thanks. Do I go through this door?”

“The place just isn’t the same. How’s your mother doing?”

“She’s off to New Hampshire.”

“It’s got to be tough.”

So, this is what he was in for, even though it’s been nine months since the crash. Gene’s moved on. “I’m kind of running late.”

“Okay, okay. Scrubs are inside. Don’t forget the booties.” She stands and looks down through the window.

Gene looks at his dress shoes.

“They’ll fit over those,” she says. “There are masks in there, or grab one by the scrub sink. Pin the locker key to your pants, and don’t lose it. Any questions?”

“Irene filled me in.”

“And work on those hands...and your chin.”

Gene starts to reach for his chin but stops.

“There’s a smudge up there as well.” She smiles.

A buzzing sound comes from the door. “Just push it open,” she says.

The buzzing stops before he can open it. Darlene takes something from the man behind her and looks back at Gene. “Another thing. Use one of these.” She passes the same style cap she’s wearing. “You’ll need this to tame that gorgeous, dark hair of yours.” The door buzzes again. “Hey, there’s coffee in the doctor’s lounge.”

Gene pushes the door open. “No thanks. I don’t drink it.”

She tips her Styrofoam cup to him and says, “You will.”

CRAP. Look at all this. The scrub pants and shirts, the color of dried moss, come in sizes double extra-small to triple extra-large. After washing his face and hands, it takes Gene more time than he can spare to sort out his size, and in the end, he settles on medium tops and bottoms. He sits on a bench and fumbles with the paper booties. Then, instead of the nurse’s bouffant cap, he tries on a regular doctor’s cap, but Darlene was right: his hair’s too long. From the boxes of masks, he chooses one like the masks he’s used in the metal shop, pinches it at the bridge of his nose. He takes a step back from the mirror over the sink and sighs. He feels like a freshman wearing a varsity uniform for the first time. Like an impostor.

Gene hurries through the heavy door to the cool, empty doctors’ lounge. Scattered across a long coffee table are plates of half-eaten sandwiches and cigarette-filled ashtrays. Sections of the previous day’s newspaper cascade from vinyl-padded chairs onto the industrial carpeted floor. The carpet tugs at the bottom of his paper booties.

Irene said to meet outside the Heart Room. The doctors’ lounge exits to a tiled corridor, a space as cool as the lounge. It’s empty of people but crowded with equipment. In front of him stands a line of stainless-steel shelving packed with supplies mostly unfamiliar to Gene except for bags of

intravenous solutions, boxes of syringes, and a stack of blankets next to more bouffant caps. As he walks toward the glassed-in OR office, he passes gurneys, stainless steel carts, IV poles, an oscilloscope similar to those in his electrical engineering lab, and another device on wheels that stands about chest high. He recognizes it by the green oxygen tank: the large glass cylinder filled with white granules (although a layer at the bottom is a purple color) and the black corrugated tubing. It looks like the anesthesia machine he's seen in an old photo of his father taken during his medical training.

"Gene." Darlene leans out of the open office door. "Irene's down there." Gene stands near the glass entry doors. The *OR Attire Only* warning is now inside out. "The Heart Room is all the way down at the end." She points past Gene to his left.

IRENE WASHES her hands at one of two deep porcelain sinks in an alcove. She works the nails of one hand with a soapy brush in fierce, rapid strokes, a nest of brownish-orange bubbles growing on the tips of her fingers. She's short and sinewy, not what he expected from the sound of her voice on the phone. The cuffs of her pants are rolled up a turn or two. Above the sink hang shelves stocked with boxes of hats and masks. She wears the same style cap as Gene. A disposable mask, the kind with two sets of ties, the kind Gene isn't wearing, hides her face except for her eyes. Maybe he chose the wrong mask. She looks over at him.

"You're late."

"My Jeep overheated."

She gives him a hard look while continuing to scrub. "You're late."

If this had been baseball practice in high school, he'd be running laps now. She looks at him again, a long look that makes him uncomfortable.

Here it comes. She's sending him packing.

But her eyes soften. "You're definitely Carl's son."

"Was he late, too?"

She shakes her head, and he knows she's smiling.

"Not only do you have his eyes, you have his voice."

She steps on a stainless-steel pedal. Water pours from the gooseneck faucet. She rinses each hand and then foot-pumps more liquid brown soap onto the brush and begins scrubbing her arms.

"I think you're even taller than when I saw you at the service," she says.

His mother told him that Irene had been Dr. Harrington's private nurse as long as he'd been in practice. She must have come through the line at his father's memorial service, but Gene doesn't remember. So many doctors and nurses had offered double-handed condolences that after a while they all blended into the same sorrowful face.

"Your dad was quite a guy. Like I said on the phone, we're not in the habit of taking on college students, but your dad was special."

Gene knows she means well, but he has the sickening feeling that in the belly of her compliment is a warning not to let her down...or his father.

"Be in the doctor's lounge dressed and ready to go by six-fifteen," she says.

"I thought you said five-thirty."

"That's just for today. I was going to teach you to scrub, but we'll hold off for now."

"Sorry."

"The girls and I start setting up at five forty-five." She looks at the clock. "Although more like six today. Depending on the case, there's about an hour of prep before Dr. Harrington cuts at seven. He can be late. You can't. This isn't college."

"Yes ma'am."

She explains that the team performs two surgeries a day except on Tuesdays and Fridays. On those afternoons, Dr. Harrington has his office hours. Gene can't shadow him then. Teaching would just slow him down. But, if Gene wants, he can follow Dr. Harrington on rounds in the afternoons when he sees his post-ops and the admits scheduled for surgery the next day.

"You might want to consider sneakers." She nods toward his bootie-covered dress shoes. "You'll be standing a lot."

That's some good news. His feet already ache.

"Have you met Dr. Boswell? He's our anesthesiologist."

"No."

"You'll be standing with him, just watching for the first week. If all goes well, Dr. Harrington will let you scrub in next week. You can do small things, like suction blood while he works."

She eyes him. "I hope you're not squeamish."

"Not at all." He fainted once while watching his father sew up a gash on Suzanne's knee, and of course after he saw the dead girl. But that was ages ago.

"If you feel faint, sit."

"Got it?"

"Don't try to be brave."

"I'll be fine."

He had envisioned this job, if that's what it was, as just tagging along, retrieving forgotten charts or x-rays, hanging a few steps back from the profession's edge before diving into medical school. He hadn't planned on actually helping during surgery. That would look great on a med-school application.

"You've never been in the OR."

It isn't a question. "No."

She smiles. “You can lower your mask.” He complies and wipes a layer of moisture from his upper lip. “You only need to wear it in there.” She tilts her head toward the Heart Room door.

After a rinse and more scrubbing, she says, “You’ll only scrub if you’re going to be gowned and gloved at the OR table. And then you’ll stand by Dr. Pereira. He’s our First Assist. I’m sure he’ll help you out. He’s such a sweetheart. But then you know Rui,” she says. “He was quite persuasive.”

Years ago, Dr. Pereira and Gene’s father trained at the same hospital in Galveston, Texas. He’s from Portugal and still carries an accent. For years, when Gene thought of Dr. Pereira, he thought of his passion for the Cincinnati Reds and more recently his twelve-cylinder Jag. He loved to work on cars, always wearing surgical gloves to keep grease from getting under his nails.

Early last May, Gene called Dr. Pereira and asked if he could spend the summer shadowing him. Gene had taken a disastrous early stab at the MCATs, and according to Gene’s counselor, his grades were more than a tick below the level of Cal Poly students previously accepted into medical school. She suggested he abandon the premed track and focus on engineering, a discipline where he excelled. Combining the two was challenging even for someone who hadn’t missed time because of a death in the family. No. Her recommendation was basically horse shit. He’s wanted to be a doctor for as long as he can remember.

To improve his chance for medical school, he needed work experience and a glowing recommendation from someone who could attest to his character and aptitude for the career. Rui had listened to all of this over the phone and suggested Gene pin his summer and his hopes on Dr. Harrington instead. “He carries considerable weight with his surgical brethren down south at the University of Arizona. I shall speak to him. I am sure he will be receptive.”

About a week later, on a Sunday afternoon, as Gene and his roommate Doug worked their way through a six-pack of Anchor Steam beer while burning Patty's letters and photos, Dr. Harrington called Gene. The conversation was short and to the point. He was in. Irene would handle the details. What stuck with Gene was the last thing Dr. Harrington said in his slow Virginian drawl: "It will be an *honah* and a privilege to have a *youngstah* of your caliber at my side." His caliber. Until recently, Gene had rarely questioned his caliber.

Irene rinses her hands and arms one last time and moves away from the sink, holding her hands at head level, arms away from her body. Then she nods to a white coat hanging opposite the sink. "That's for you. Wear it over your scrubs whenever you leave the surgery area."

Gene holds the coat at the shoulders. Red cursive stitching over the left breast reads *Desert Valley Heart Team*.

"We all have one," she says.

Then he notices C. Hull printed on the collar's tag in black ink. Gene recognizes the block script and swallows hard.

"Thanks," he says. He tries the coat on. It feels a size too large, the sleeves reaching to mid-palm.

"Maybe you'll grow into it." Irene walks across the hall and leans her back against the door to the Heart Room, her arms held high like the Pope in greeting. "Put it in your locker, and then come on in."

THE HEART ROOM is even colder than the hallway. Gooseflesh rises on Gene's arms.

"Sandra, Betty. This is Gene, Doctor Hull's son," Irene says. The masked women are opening packs of instruments onto Irene's two long, draped tables, but pause to shake his hand.

“I adored your father,” Sandra says.

He recognizes her. “You spoke at the service, right?”

Sandra nods.

Gene sits on a rolling stool at the head of the empty surgical table, while Irene points out what Gene can’t touch, which is most everything. Ceramic tile comes halfway up the walls. Gene asks, “Why’s it so cold in here?”

“I don’t want Dr. Harrington sweating into the patient’s chest. Here. Put this on.” She hands a surgical gown to Sandra who holds it open like a tailor waiting for Gene’s arms.

A man walks in wearing a five o’clock shadow and a custom cap decorated with Valentine hearts. He introduces himself as Roger, the pump tech.

“I heard you’d be joining us. Your dad was the best.”

He invites Gene to slide closer to the heart-lung machine and explains how the device works as he sets it up. Open heart surgery involves letting a machine do the work of the heart and lungs while the surgeons fix the problem. That’s bypass — the heart and lungs are bypassed.

Roger guides clear tubing through the roller pump, fills the tubing with saline, and then taps at the tubing with a clamp to move any bubbles up toward a stopcock. “Air in your blood is like air in your car’s fuel line,” he says. “Not a good thing.”

“Vapor lock,” Gene says.

“Exactly.”

Betty, the older (and considerably wider) of the two circulating nurses marks off a checklist as Irene runs her fingers and eyes over orderly rows of glittering instruments. Irene calls off, “Kellys. Two, four, six. Mayos. Two, four, six, and one on the floor makes seven. Scissors. Straight. One, two. Curved. One, two....” It goes on and on. She counts what must be a hundred instruments as well as a stack of four-by-four gauze pads, laps (Dr. Pereira used these to wax his car), and every suture, every needle,

everything that is on either of her tables or adjustable tray, right down to small, cotton bullets called peanuts, which are gripped by the tips of long clamps. “We’ll count at the end of surgery as well,” Irene says. “If the counts don’t match, we’ll search until they do. Don’t want a patient taking hospital property home.”

Sandra, probably the youngest in the room except for Gene, continues to move back and forth from the operating room to center hall — the area in the middle of the U-shaped surgery configuration. That’s where things are sterilized and stored until needed. Sandra moves about with confidence. She opens sterile packs of gowns and gloves in a prescribed way meant to insure there is no breach in sterility.

Soon, he realizes that his attention is focused on her eyes. As a matter of fact, all he can see of anyone’s face is their eyes. The caps and masks frame them. Sandra’s eyes aren’t like Patty’s. They aren’t blue, much less a blue you could swim in. Hers are olive with long mascaraed lashes. She’s taller than Patty, closer to Gene’s height. As she collects an armload of unopened supplies, a ribbon of her brown hair escapes her bonnet. Does her conditioner smell like Patty’s? When she backs up to the door leading to center hall, she catches Gene staring. Her eyes smile. He gestures to indicate the loose hair. He’s sure she mouths *Thank you*.

A moment later, the OR door opens, and a stocky man strides in. “I see y’all rounded up a new anesthesiologist?” he says.

Irene turns. “Gene, this is Doctor Boswell.”

He shakes Gene’s hand. “Call me Boz. Darlene said you were here. So, you’re trailing Dr. H around this summer?” He rolls a red Craftsman cart closer to the anesthesia machine, opens a drawer and lays out some syringes.

“It’s only for eight weeks until he goes on vacation,” Gene says. “Is that cart from Sears?”

“Yes.” Dr. Boswell pulls vials of medications from another drawer and begins drawing the liquids into the syringes. “Irene,” he says, turning. “Since when does Harrington go on vacation?”

“He tries every year, Doctor.”

Dr. Boswell adjusts some dials on the anesthesia machine, holds a mask near his face and presses a button, causing a blast of air from the mask. “Ah, Halothane,” he says. “Breakfast of champions.” Gene catches a whiff of something pungent. Dr. Boswell then lays out a couple of instruments and an endotracheal tube on top of the cart, items familiar to Gene from his father’s doctor bag. “I’ll explain things once we get going,” Dr. Boswell says, “but I suspect you know most of this from your dad.”

He doesn’t. Why exactly? He’s not sure.

Sandra walks in from center hall carrying some kind of black paddles in her gloved hands. “Sandy, darling,” Dr. Boswell says, “I’m going to need an epi drip for later.”

“Okay.” She hands the paddles to Irene, snaps off her gloves and scans the room. “I’m off for the patient.”

Several minutes later, with the help of an orderly, Sandra wheels a half-asleep man into the room and transfers him to the table. The patient is already hooked up to an IV. Sandra attaches the electrocardiogram pads. The oscilloscope’s green line comes to life — *beep, beep, beep*.

Dr. Boz straps a black rubber mask to the man’s face, injects medication into the IV, and says, “Say goodnight, Irene.” After another syringe of medication, Dr. Boz grips the mask and squeezes the black breathing bag. With each squeeze, the man’s chest rises.

As soon as the man is out, Dr. Boz inserts the breathing tube — the endotracheal tube — through the man’s mouth into his windpipe and tapes it in place. He also tapes the man’s eyes closed and wraps the man’s head with the towel.

Dr. Boz inserts a cannula into an artery at the man's wrist, something Gene's father must have done thousands of times. A second wave now bounces in synchrony under the EKG. Finally, Dr. Boz inserts an IV in the man's neck vein using a kit Gene had not seen Betty prepare. It just appeared. The teamwork is impressive.

"Okay, Sandy," he says. "Work your magic."

In seconds, Sandra strips the patient of his blanket and hospital gown, revealing a man as large and unshapely as Camelback Mountain. His naked body doesn't draw a glance. Using her gloved hands, Sandra lathers the man's penis and testicles with a sudsy pink solution. She pulls the man's penis upward and slides a lubricated catheter through the slit. Gene winces. Sandra bundles the items she's been using and throws them into a large receptacle in the corner. Irene aligns instruments on her adjustable stand. Roger once again taps on his bypass tubing. Gene hardly knows who to watch. Like warm-ups before a game — hitting, fielding, throwing — every player is prepping for the first pitch.

After scrubbing the man's skin with more of the pink solution, Sandra paints his mountain of flesh with Betadine. Now he is orange-brown from his chin to his knees. Small bubbles slide along the slope of his landscape and then pop. He looks cold.

Dr. Boswell writes in his anesthesia record, pausing every few seconds to glance at his monitors. Sometimes he injects a medication. Sometimes he adjusts a dial on the anesthesia machine, raising or lowering a bullet-sized float in an amber tube. Gene sits on a stool next to him. Each time the ventilator hisses, the bellows drop and the patient's chest rises. As a boy, Gene asked his father to explain what he did at work. "Well," he said, "I put the patient to sleep and then wake them up when we're done."

This is a bit more than put them to sleep. He should have pressed his father more. He should have asked to watch him work. Too late now.

Gene recognizes Dr. Pereira as soon as he backs into the operating room. Water and suds drip off his elbows. Irene hands him a sterile towel.

“Boz,” Dr. Pereira says, his mask billowing. “I see the administration has taken my advice and assigned a young man of impeccable character to monitor your activities in the operating room.” He dries his hands and arms while he looks at Gene over the top of his half-frame glasses. He’s run a length of white tape from earpiece to earpiece over the crown of his surgeon’s cap. “Gene, a delight indeed to see you again. How did you fare with your final exams?”

“A draw at best.”

“I have no doubt you will emerge the conqueror. So glad to have you with us.” He drops the towel to the ground and kicks it aside with his foot.

“But I feel for you, Gene. For the next four hours you must suffer the company of the good Dr. Boswell.”

Irene snaps open a sterile gown. Dr. Pereira inserts his arms into the sleeves.

“I take it you’ve got some history with Rui,” Dr. Boswell says.

Gene nods.

“That’s a shame.”

While Sandra ties Dr. Pereira’s gown, Irene curls her fingers under the cuff of a latex glove and stretches it open, the fingers dangling.

“Boz,” Dr. Pereira says. “Have you heard this one: How do you know elephants have been making love in your alley?” He thrusts his hand into the glove.

“Gene,” Dr. Boswell says. “Do you know anyone telling elephant jokes anymore?”

“Gene?” Dr. Pereira says. “Care to hazard a guess?” Dr. Pereira notices Irene waiting with the second glove and obliges.

“Give up?” He releases the tie-string at his waist and holds it out to Irene, who grasps it while Dr. Pereira pirouettes 360 degrees, drawing the

full-length flap around his back. He takes the tie from Irene and ties it in a bow. “All your trash can liners, they are missing.”

Gene smiles. His father sometimes prefaced a joke at the dinner table with *I heard this at the hospital*. Gene assumed he meant the doctors’ lounge or the diner. He envisioned the operating room as all business. At least it was on television.

When Dr. Harrington backs into the heart room, the chatter halts. He accepts a towel from Irene, and with an elephant’s grace and power moves to the X-ray view box, where he examines the films already mounted there. Dr. Harrington has several years on Dr. Pereira. A neat line of silver hair protrudes an inch below the back of his surgeon’s cap. Physically, he could have been a former home-run hitter twenty years past his prime — still the broad shoulders and massive forearms, but thick through the middle. “I trust the patient is surviving so fahr,” he says in his hypnotic, Southern way.

“Cruising at thirty thousand,” Dr. Boswell says.

Dr. Pereira moves to the side of the table opposite Irene. She hands him green towels the size of kitchen towels, and he cordons off a rectangle of skin the length of the man’s breastbone. Then they cover it all with what looks like brown-tinted cellophane. With Irene’s assistance, Dr. Harrington gowns and gloves. He takes his position next to her and accepts a folded drape. Together, he and Dr. Pereira unfold it the length of the patient, the near end taken by Dr. Boswell and affixed with clamps to IV poles on either side of the patient’s head.

“Gene, you know what this is?” Dr. Boswell says, running his hand along the back of the drape. The top edge comes to Gene’s mid-chest. “We call this the blood-brain barrier — the blood on their side, the brains on our side.”

Dr. Pereira grins behind his mask. He attaches handles to the two alien-spaceship-looking lights overhead. “Gene, here is a sad truth. Were it not for Dr. Boz’s hands, he might be a surgeon today.” He focuses the beam of

one light onto the man's exposed skin. "But, alas. The cost of manufacturing custom gloves with ten thumbs proved prohibitive."

Using a lap, Dr. Pereira wipes the illuminated narrow rectangle. Dr. Harrington palpates the notch at the top of patient's breast-bone — the sternum. "Eugene," he says. "This unfortunate man nearly expired while raking his pink-rock lawn in Sun City. He has elected to have us bypass two blockages in his coronaries so that his dear wife can once again place a rake in his hands." He looks up and laughs, the eyes behind his thick lenses as large as quarters. Then he holds out his right hand. Irene snaps a scalpel's handle against his palm.

In a single, swift stroke Dr. Harrington incises the man's flesh over the length of the sternum down to the bone. Seconds later, the skin and fat bleed. Dr. Pereira touches a wand-like device to the bleeding vessels and steps on a foot pedal. The wand buzzes but nothing happens. "A little higher, if you will, Sandra," Dr. Pereira says.

Sandra turns the dial on a gray box near the foot of the bed. When Dr. Pereira presses the pedal this time, the blood bubbles and pops. As he continues to cauterize the bleeding, a swirling column of smoke rises like an apparition from the charred tissue into the surgical light. The smell is like fat burning on a grill. Gene breathes through his mouth. Dr. Harrington sews the thick skin edge back away from the underlying sternum. Irene then hands him a stainless-steel jigsaw with some sort of guide on the end. The saw connects to a black tank behind him via an air hose.

Starting at the patient's neck, Dr. Harrington angles the saw's blunt tip under the bone and pulls up. When he presses the trigger, the saw whines. He rips along the length of bone, a rooster tail of bone dust trailing the saw as the sternum splits in half. As Dr. Harrington exposes one edge with an angled instrument, Dr. Pereira uses the cautery to char the bleeding marrow. It simmers and pops, the smell like nothing Gene has ever encountered, far worse than an eighteen-wheeler's burned-out brakes. More like the stench

he imagines from still images out of Vietnam — naked, smoking, burned-out bodies in a charred village. Breathing through his mouth isn't helping, but Gene doesn't budge from his standing position, looking over the drapes.

The surgeons switch roles. Now, Dr. Harrington begins long continuous torches along the bone's edge.

Jeez, the smell must be entering through his ears.

"Gene," Dr. Boswell says behind him. "You feel okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

"Take a seat if you need to." It's Sandra. She's moved behind him with an IV pole and hangs a bottle.

"What's that?"

"Saline." She attaches the tubing and studies him. "Should I hook this up to you instead?"

"I'm fine, okay?"

Irene passes a medieval-looking device to Dr. Pereira. "This is the chest spreader," Dr. Pereira says. Dr. Harrington positions it under the edges of the split sternum, and with a few turns of the crank, the man's chest opens like a carpet bag. The tapered edge of each lung surges from the periphery of the gaping chest, nearly meeting in the middle, before retreating.

Suddenly, heat floods Gene's face.

"You're not a smoker, are you, Gene?" Dr. Pereira asks.

"Smoker?"

"Observe this man's lungs... There... One might postulate he worked in a coal mine."

"What? No."

"To have lungs young and pink. It's a beautiful thing."

"Gene?" It's Dr. Boswell. "Slow your breathing."

"What?"

"Sandy!"

Gene is turning, falling backwards down a narrowing tunnel. He reaches for the IV pole. It falls with him. Someone grabs his arm.

“Gene!”

In an instant, Sandra’s masked face, her worried, green eyes fade to darkness.

WHEN HE AWAKES, Sandra gives him some orange juice. He sits against the wall by the OR door as surgery continues in hushed tones and clinking of instruments. Kneeling next to him she says, “That’s a new one.”

“Fainting?”

“No. We’ve never had anyone go to ground and take the patient’s IV with them.” She tells him the glass bottle shattered into several large pieces. Fortunately, he didn’t pull the IV catheter out of the patient’s arm. Instead, the tubing pulled apart at a junction point. The patient lost a little blood on the floor, but after a short delay, while she and Dr. Boswell hung a new IV, everything was back on track.

“You still look a little pale.” She replaces a cold wash cloth on the back of his neck. “You eat this morning?”

“Not much.”

“Just sit here for now. We’re on bypass.”

“I’m sorry,” he says.

As the team focuses on their tasks Gene feels invisible. At least to everyone but Dr. Boswell, who calls out from his position behind the blood-brain barrier. “Welcome back, Chief. Glad you could rejoin us.”

After a time, Gene rises and sits on a rolling stool by the phone. Between calls for instruments by the two surgeons, who are head to head, hunched over the patient, Irene glances his way.

“Gene,” she says.

Her stern tone cuts right to his fear.
“Go home. I’ll call you tonight.”

HE DRESSES and drags what’s left of his dignity back to the Jeep. The black vinyl seat threatens to seer through his slacks. Let it burn, just like his last chance for medical school crashed and burned today. No doubt, Irene’s call will be to dis-invite him from the Heart Team. He rests his sore palm on the steering wheel, forgetting it’s as hot as a branding iron. “Shit!”

He starts the engine and angles back, but before he shifts into first, before the red dashboard light blinks on again, he spots a large puddle of fluid where he’d parked, as if the Jeep had wet its pants. This isn’t how the summer was supposed to start.

The sun presses down with near maximum heat, ricocheting off chrome and glass, and all around the full lot, not a single beating heart, except for Gene’s, dares to loll in this no man’s land between one air-conditioned sanctuary and another. But he loves it. The superheated air feels like the blank slate of his best summer days. He reaches into the glove box for sunglasses and notices his tattered Citrus Care scheduling book. He pulls it out, flips to August 14, 1971 and reads the entry. And to think, he didn’t even know her name.

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Chapter Three

WHEN I SAW HER STANDING THERE



August 14, 1971, Phoenix, Arizona

A BEAD of sweat dripped off Gene's stubbled chin and plopped into the can of tree-white paint. He moved the can aside, balanced the wide bristle-brush across the top, and sat cross legged under the navel orange tree's canopy. On the tinny transistor, KCAZ announced the time as four o'clock, the temperature 101, and warned of a possible dust storm. Gene wiped his face and bare chest with his folded t-shirt. After an unending succession of cloudless days, the summer air, usually as still and dry as loneliness, was quickening. Dark clouds stacked one atop the other on the eastern horizon. They were moving west.

For the last couple days, he'd been painting citrus trees on this small tract of new homes. He still needed to meet the owners next door. They hadn't moved in, but it should be soon. The front and back yards were graded, a couple queen palms framed the sidewalk, and the orange trees had been trimmed. With their bare trunks, they looked embarrassingly naked next to Gene's white-clad army. Now, a boss Sapphire Blue Mustang was parked in the drive. Must have arrived while he was taking a piss. After this last tree he'd head over.

He hoisted his thermos and drank the remaining water in long, eager draws. Across the street on the Grant Elementary School ballfield a group of boys yelled *mine, mine, mine* as a fly ball arched their way. A small black dog barked and scampered from batter to fielders. Gene had played the same game — 500 — during his grade school summers. In less than a month, he'd begin his senior year of high school, and this summer, like the previous two, he painted trees. He called his little business *Citrus Care*.

His subdivision and the surrounding neighborhoods had been carved from thirty-year-old orange and grapefruit groves, the surviving trees' canopies trimmed unnaturally to the hip, exposing the trunks. Without a coat of paint, the bark would burn. When he was fourteen his father put him to work on their trees — a small grove of nine in back and four in front.

"These are your trees now," his father had said. "Own them."

Gene had. The immediate neighbors noticed the job and hired him for their trees. Over the summers the business grew from the edges, his services spilling from house to house, and soon included fertilization three times a year. The work was simple and mindless, but he loved the way he felt after a shower, scrubbed of dirt and salt rings, his swollen veins coursing up his arms before diving deep to his heart.

Gene moved his equipment to the last tree. To protect the new grass, he draped an old *Johnny Quest* bedsheet around the trunk's base. Using his father's yellow-handled shop brush, he broke off the suckers, whisked away loose debris from the bark, and then sprayed the bark with a hard stream of water. He applied masking tape eight to ten inches out each main branch and then laid on a thick coat of paint from the base to the tape. When he was done, he peeled the tape away and stood back, admiring today's work, the trees resembling stout young men in white t-shirts, their sleeves bulging at the biceps.

Overhead, the leaves began to rustle. He removed his paint-spotted wide-brimmed hat and looked north toward a solitary, three story

eucalyptus — the Big Tree — rising from where the street ended and a dirt path began. The branches at the crown swayed west. This storm would strike soon, but it didn't smell like rain. He wished it did. More likely he was in for a towering dust storm, a fifteen-hundred-foot-high wall of dirt scooped from the surrounding desert and dumped into his family's swimming pool, which he'd have to clean. Better roll it up.

After loading his gear in the rear of his yellow Jeep, he climbed in back and sat under the vinyl canopy, making an entry in a small scheduling notebook.

A cry came from the direction of the ballfield. "Hey, mister! Can you give us a little help?"

Gene looked over and saw the batter tapping his bat on the grass. "I was just getting ready to go home."

"Your dog took our ball," the boy said.

"My dog? What dog?"

"The dog under your Jeep."

Gene hopped out and crouched down. Under the driveshaft, a muscular ink-black mutt the size of a large Chihuahua lay panting with the baseball between its white-stockinged paws. Gene grabbed his lunch pail and enticed it out with a chunk of his mother's apple crisp. He threw the ball back to the kids.

The dog padded in place and licked his chops. No tags. Not even a collar. His belly was caked with mud. Gene gave him the left-over corner crust from lunch and water in a plastic cup. Maybe the Mustang owner knew the dog.

Gene picked him up and hustled to the front door. He rang the doorbell and knocked several times, but nobody answered nor could he see anyone through the window. He jogged to the side of the house, where the gate for the redwood fence had yet to be installed. A gust whistled through the orange trees and whipped his hat from his head, sending it tumbling through

the open fence into the backyard. With stabbing strides, he trapped the hat with his foot. When he looked up, standing at the edge of the rebar-lined pool...was a girl. Her eyes were closed. She fingered the hem of her peach-colored sleeveless top, while the frayed strings of her cutoffs patted her thighs. Her thick dark hair rippled behind her like a beckoning flag. She just stood there as if hypnotized, a slight smile on her face, her slender body braced against the gusts. Later, he would recall that moment as if it were the movie poster for a love story.

Gene called out, "Are you okay?"

She startled and turned.

He shouted again over the wind. "Are you okay?"

She sidestepped to put more of the pool between them.

"I'm looking for the owner. I'm Gene. I was painting trees next door." She took another step back. He looked down at the dog in his arms. "I live about a mile from here." He nodded to the north. "I found this dog. It's lost." She remained silent, studying him.

"You live here?" he said.

"Not yet."

"Do you know who he belongs to?"

She shook her head.

The gusts thrashed the newly planted queen palms into a frenzy. "This is quite a storm. You want to get under cover?" He stepped back, trying to appear less threatening.

She faced the wind. "I love this weather."

"Yeah, it's nice." Gene sidled under the cover of the patio, the house a welcome buttress against the storm. "You go to Central? I don't recall seeing you?"

"We just moved."

Her hair whipped across her face and she swept it back. She was about a head shorter than him. The dog squirmed and barked once.

“Sure you don’t want to get out of the wind?”

She shook her head.

“You a senior?”

“Yes”

“Me too!” He smiled and petted the dog’s head. “That’s got to be tough. I mean moving to a new school your last year.”

She looked past him. Gene turned, expecting to see someone through the Arcadia door, but the family room beyond the glass was empty.

“Hey, I could show you around. You know, before school starts.”

She twisted her mouth.

“Just meet there sometime,” he said.

“Sure.”

“Right on.” Gene stepped off the patio, shifted the dog to one side and extended his hand. “I’m Gene, by the way.”

A dust devil blasted across the yard. They both turned their backs to the onslaught. Then she rushed past him and onto the patio. He followed and shook the dirt out of his hair. “You okay?”

She nodded while coughing.

“You really should get your Mustang in the garage. I’ll give you a hand.”

“It’s my father’s.” She tilted her head. “He’s working inside on the closets.”

Gene looked through the glass. “That’s great. I wanted to ask him about painting your trees.”

She turned to the yard.

“I paint the trunks white,” he said. “To protect them from the sun.” He placed a hand on the door.

“Wait,” she said. She touched his hand and recoiled as if he was on fire. “Wait here.”

“Does he need a hand?”

“Let me check. He’s going to be awhile.”

“I could give you a lift home. I mean if you don’t want to wait.”

Uneasiness clouded her blue eyes. A timid smile. It worried him. Maybe her father was a bit of a hard-ass. But Gene was happy to wait. He’d wait forever if it meant driving her home.

“I’ll just be a minute,” she said and closed the door behind her.

The sky darkened. He looked down at the dog. “What do I do with you?”

He faced the backyard. The storm was peaking, every molecule in the air replaced by dust and leaves and paper debris, reducing his squinting view of the pool to a mirage. The orange trees raked and screamed in gale-force spasms. One of the young queen palms along the fence uprooted and landed at the pool’s edge, precisely where the girl had been standing. He smiled, thinking he could tell her he practically saved her life. He leaned against the wall and waited several more minutes before peering through the glass with cupped hands. No movement. Nothing. He checked the sliding door, but it was locked.

“Jeez.” With the dog tucked under his arm, he ran around to the front.

The Sapphire Blue Mustang was gone. He stared at the spot where the car had been. A fleeting notion, a desperate hope really, entered his mind: maybe she’d be right back. Then he heard flapping. The Jeep’s faded black-vinyl canopy, ripped from its moorings except at one corner, waved in tattered surrender in the waning breeze. Gene placed the dog on the passenger seat and checked the back of the Jeep. The paint-splattered bed sheet had blown against the house next door. He collected it, untied the canopy, and tucked both under the heavy paint can in the rear. Then he brushed dust from the driver’s seat and climbed in. The dog, trembling, let out a yip.

Gene felt something new and inchoate, a connection to this girl, so profound and illogical that it must be love. He’d dated other girls in high

school — homecomings and proms, a rented tux, close dancing, and a goodnight kiss. But he'd never had a girlfriend. For it seemed the girls he'd been attracted to were either too tall, too beautiful, too full of themselves, or too attached to someone else to give Gene more than a friendly glance. He was the guy they talked to about their guy-problems.

No longer the shortest kid in school, he was just the shortest on the varsity baseball team, embarrassingly listed on the roster as a five-foot-nine, hundred-and-twenty-five-pound pitcher and second baseman. He was, he thought, not unattractive; certainly not a cleft-chinned homecoming-king type, but pleasant enough to be within the margins of this girl's sphere. But what was her sphere? Did she like sports? What were her hopes and desires? He didn't know anything about her, except that she was a senior and ran from him. Was it fear or timidity? Either way her escape was brilliant. And those eyes. He'd seen blue eyes before, but not this color blue. Eyes so blue, if you dove in, you'd never reach the bottom. But more than the color, her eyes ached, practically pleaded for help. And it wasn't just to escape him.

Gene pulled out his scheduling book and wrote a note. He had a feeling he'd want to remember this date: August 14, 1971. The day I first saw...

He looked over at the dog. "I don't even know her name."

Ears cocked and looking at Gene with pleading eyes, the dog whined.

"Mom's gonna have a cow when she sees you," Gene said. But what could he do? Abandon him?

Gene rattled the Jeep's stick into neutral, then completed his entry...*the girl I'll someday marry*. He pressed the accelerator and turned the key. The tachometer leapt.

FOR THE NEXT THREE WEEKS, each afternoon after painting trees, Gene ran past her house hoping to see her again. But each day her blue Mustang failed to materialize.

Then on the Saturday of Labor Day weekend with school beginning the following week, he left for his run in the mid-morning. He'd never been much of a runner but had settled into a routine. Already he felt in better condition for the upcoming baseball season. He turned at the dirt path, ran past the Big Tree and skirted around the red and white striped barricade and onto Third Street. Up ahead, at the curb of the girl's house, two men unloaded a couch from the truck of a small local moving company. A woman stood at the front door directing the two men inside. Gene, sweaty, in running shorts and an old Central High baseball practice t-shirt, ambled up the front walkway. He waved to the woman as she accompanied the men back outside. In an instant, he recognized the similarity between the girl's and this woman's dark hair and blue eyes.

She looked suspiciously over Gene's shoulder and then back at him. "Yes, can I help you?" Smiling now.

"I'm Gene Hull. I don't know if your daughter told you about me, but I paint citrus trees. Fertilize, too. I've done the other four homes on this street, and I was wondering if you'd like me to handle yours."

"Oh, so you're the young man who scared her."

Gene's tongue thickens. "I didn't mean to — "

The woman placed a hand on Gene's shoulder and laughed. "I'm kidding. You hardly look the threatening type."

She stepped past the porch and looked left and right down the block. "I wondered why everyone's trees were painted white. Something about the temperature?"

Gene nodded. "It's not so much the temperature. Well, it is the temperature, but also the sun's angle." He used his tanned arms like a

drawing compass and pantomimed how the low winter sun skirted under the tree's canopy and struck the trunk.

"You know your trees."

"Yes, ma'am."

"How much?"

For a date with your daughter, he thought, I'll paint them and pay *you*.

"Four dollars a tree. Three to fertilize."

She looked past him. "That was quick."

Gene turned. The Mustang was pulling into the driveway.

The girl eyed Gene a moment and then exited the driver's side and opened the trunk. The rear door opened. A surly-faced boy got out and immediately reached back in for a box.

"Dennis," the woman said. "Put that in the living room for now until they have your bedroom furniture unloaded."

He passed Dennis, a little bulldog-of-a-kid who looked Gene up and down.

"Why does Patty get the biggest room?"

"March," his mother said.

So her name is Patty.

Dennis huffed away. "He's going to be a sophomore." She pointed to Gene's shirt. "You play baseball at Central? Dennis wants to try out for catcher."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm Gene Hull. I didn't catch your name."

"It's Gloria McLellan."

Patty McLellan. Beautiful.

Patty, wearing a tie-dyed t-shirt that fell just short of her knees, carried a stack of hangered clothes.

"Let me help you," Gene said.

"No, I've got it."

“There’s more in the trunk if you want to lend a hand,” Mrs. McLellan said. Then she called back to Patty. “Are you drinking water?”

“Yes. I’m drinking water,” Patty said. She sounded as if she’d been asked that question a hundred times.

Gene, Patty, and Dennis emptied the loaded Mustang of boxes, clothes, and odds and ends, while Mrs. McLellan directed them to this room or that, including Patty’s bedroom, one of the rooms that looked out to the ballfield across the street. The powdery aroma of Patty’s perfume rose from the armload of clothes he deposited atop her naked mattress.

They made three more trips to empty out a nearby short-stay apartment. Gene sat in back. During one of the drives, Gene asked, “So where’s your dad?”

Patty and Dennis looked at each other.

“Probably with his girlfriend,” Dennis said.

“Dennis!”

“Jerk,” Dennis said.

Patty gave Dennis a hurt look.

“Not you. Dad.”

A wave of heat spread up Gene’s neck. He looked up at the rear-view mirror. Patty averted her eyes.

“He’s in Van Nuys,” Dennis said. “Mom divorced him.”

Turning to look between the seats, Dennis said, “You’re on varsity at Central?”

Gene nodded, thinking about the day of the storm, the day Patty told him her father was inside the house.

“What do you play?” Dennis said.

“Pitcher. Second when I’m not pitching. Your mom says you’re a catcher.”

“Catcher. First base. I’ll play anything to make varsity.”