

# California

An uncle sits quietly on our back steps, slumping and smoking. He is wearing his mechanic's uniform, grimy in places from scooting under cars and leaning over their engines. He has come here unexpectedly, having rushed his dog to the veterinarian in our town. The dog has been hit by a passing car, or it has been hit by the uncle's car, it isn't made clear. It has been some months since I last saw the uncle, at Christmas at my grandparents' house. Sometime during that afternoon, after everyone has eaten and the adults are sitting around thinking about finding their children and going home, there is a commotion in the kitchen. My uncle has been absent most of the day, and now has returned. My grandfather comes into the living room, dragging the uncle with him. My grandfather pulls the uncle's hands over a shoulder and drags him toward a back bedroom. The uncle's head bobs loosely back and forth on a rubbery neck, his eyes half-closed. His speech is slurred. He struggles against my grandfather. He curses at my grandfather, and his words are garbled and thick. His protests fade into an indecipherable mumbling. Pleading and desperate, he says something about a drink. He is thirsty, I think, but no one gives him a drink.

My brothers and cousins scramble out of the way as the uncle is dragged into a bedroom and dropped onto the bed. My grandfather comes out of the bedroom and closes the door. He is grim. Several of my brothers and cousins stare with large eyes. A cousin, one of the uncle's daughters, avoids my gaze. In the kitchen, the grown-ups are quiet for a while.

Now, sitting on our back steps, the uncle puts his arms on his knees and buries his head in his hands. He is red-eyed, his hand trembles when he brings his cigarette to his lips. His dark hair is oily and wild, his skin yellowish. He reminds me of a bird that has fallen from its nest and can't fly. I ask him about the dog, but he doesn't answer. Quietly, he begins to cry. I have never seen the men cry. I have seen only a few of the women cry, and only very rarely. Crying is strongly discouraged.

I tell myself that he cries because his dog was hit by a car, but I sense that there might be other reasons. I feel sorry and embarrassed for the uncle. I don't want anyone to see him this way. I want to make him feel better, but I don't know how. We eventually hear that his dog can't be saved and that the vet says it should be "put down." To try and save the dog will cost a lot of money, we hear. The dog is put down.

My uncle married my aunt when she was fourteen years old. After some years of hard luck, they and their children move away to California, to start over. A few years after they are gone, a car stops in our driveway, and it is the aunt and my cousins. The aunt has a new husband. The uncle is gone. My cousins have changed. They have different hair, they have different voices, and they have different clothing. They are now from somewhere else.

One of my cousins emerges from the car and time seems to stop. I see her walking toward me in slow motion, her body moving languidly, all golden arms and legs and chestnut hair, and a smile that terrifies. She is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. While I have been throwing a baseball and riding bicycles with my brothers these several years, this cousin has been listening to rock-and-roll and driving young men completely out of their minds. I am embarrassed and self-conscious when she casually says hello. I am a skinny kid with thick glasses and a buzz cut. I know next to nothing about the world. She is radiant, regal and bored. She is "cool, laid back, groovy, a bitchin' chick," we learn from her brothers. She tosses her hair, and it is like she has stepped out of a movie and into a place where no one like her has ever stepped.

The cousins use phrases I have never heard. They look at my brothers and me as if we are part of an exhibit from the Stone Age. They are friendly, but they have left the dirt roads and the barbed wire far behind them. "Far out," they keep saying. They say that it takes three days to drive from California, over mountains and through deserts. Their trip was a "gas," a "blast." They would "cruise" all day and then "crash" at a motel for the night.

My aunt, who is tall like my grandfather, is statuesque and glowing, an older version of her daughter. Her Texas accent of thirty years is gone. She seems happy, and strikingly different from the quiet woman I remember.

I think that this California must be some kind of place. Why is it that my parents can't move us to someplace where people say "right on" instead of "yeah"? Why can't we live in a place where the young men wear their hair a little longer and the young women look like my cousin? Soon my cousins have to "split," they have to "beat it." They will see us at our grandparents' house in a few days.

At my grandparents' house, my aunt's new husband is telling the grown-ups about something that happened during their trip from California. They stop for a few dollars worth of gas, but the young man who pumps the gas is distracted by the sight of my cousin sipping Coke from a bottle, and he fills the car's tank to overflowing. He pumps ten dollars worth of gas, but my aunt's new husband tells him he will pay only the few dollars. All the grown-ups laugh at the story. They don't yet know my aunt's new husband, but they want him to be good. They are wary but will give him a chance. He owns a restaurant, and the grown-ups can't think of much to say to him about it. They nod and look at one another, and try hard to think of something to say.

I am uneasy in the presence of my male cousins. Away from the grown-ups they use words we are forbidden to use. They seem wild and out of control. I think that they might get into trouble out there in California. They have changed.

My aunt talks with her sisters and my grandmother in the kitchen. They talk like they have always talked, about hard times, about their husbands, about their kids' troubles. They talk to one another without emotion, without feeling, without affection. To the causal observer, they might have been strangers. Something in their hardscrabble past has driven them apart, or perhaps they have always been apart, I don't know. Aren't they excited to see my aunt and her family? Don't they want to know everything about her life in California? Don't they want to squeeze her hand and tell her congratulations and wish her all the luck, and can they do anything for her, anything at all? I think they are suspicious of my aunt's new good fortune, of her new life, and of California. Maybe they don't expect the good to last, or maybe they might not want it to last. I wonder if my aunt will ever come back here again.

Soon, it is time for us to split, to boogie, to cut out, and we wave goodbye to those who step outside. In the car on the way home, my mother and father renew an old argument on the subject of his family. My mother tells my father that the members of his family are not very affectionate with one another. My father is at a loss to defend them, but he attacks my mother's family for being overly affectionate – always hugging and kissing each other, for God's sake, he tells her. My father shakes his head, unable to understand my mother's people. My mother shakes her head, unable to understand my father's people. The argument goes on for a while, but it doesn't become serious. My parents have long ago found their own tipping point between too much affection, and not enough, and it will be okay.

I know that we will not be starting over in California, or in any other place. This is the place we know. We will grind it out here. In some years time, young men here will begin wearing their hair a little longer,

and I will discover that here, too, there will be groovy, bitchin' chicks like my beautiful cousin. These things are years away, but they are coming, and nothing can stop them. I know our world will change. Up until the middle of the 1960s here, it will remain the middle of the 1950s. But rock-and-roll is on its way, along with much else. Soon enough, this dry Texas backwater will be dragged into the present day.

Over the course of the years to come, we hear that my cousins do get into some unspecified trouble out there in California. After some years of hard luck, one of them returns to Texas, to start over. He moves into a bunkhouse out on the windy expanse of the Moorhouse Ranch, where the long silences, and his drinking, help make California a distant memory. My beautiful cousin breaks many hearts, but whatever she is looking for she doesn't find in California, and her beauty slowly hardens.