

THE GOD POCKET

The two men on the plane were drunk before takeoff. By the end of the flight they were feral, making grunting noises and laughing. Both were well-tanned thirty-somethings with boyish faces. All the way down the coast their chatter had distracted him from reading his book—"It was one big wall, closing fast, man...." In the immigration corridor the two made mournful yelps to a friend who was near the front. "Sandhead!" one of them yelled. People rolled their eyes, quietly disapproving. Yes, it was Cabo, where you're supposed to loosen up, but Ashley could only thank two Valiums for not succumbing to his e-doc annoyance at drunks.

It was his ninth visit to his brother's vacation house perched on the Pacific cliff in Pedregal. He'd made one visit a year since Ken built the place.

Ken kept an open-door policy for Ashley, sometimes dropping by for a day or two when he was there. Ken was a retired developer who had escaped the latest bust with what he claimed to be only nicks and bruises. He'd put his horde into treasuries, avoiding the crash by a nose, and then reinvested in the pit of the bear market. Even when he did lose, Ken had the irritating virtue of making the best of it. In 2006, he had taken on prostate cancer as if it were an unexpected mountain-climbing adventure, researching it and getting the best advice and treatment. Now he dated professional women or retirees who had survived multiple marriages and wanted only companionship. Four years older than Ashley, Ken was temperamentally suited to a Twittering world.

On the phone recently, Ashley had told Ken that he drove him crazy by being like some Republican Buddhist, right thinking and wrong as hell. "Yeah," his brother had said, "and you're a liberal reactionary bookhead stuck in the past, who saves a life or two every day. You refuse to retire like me and become a useless fuck. The world's a mixed-up place, Brother Ash. Why don't you watch TV more and get nervous and normal."

Ashley had no plans for early retirement, despite hospital management's push to harvest the "older" salaries. As low as e-room doctors were on the totem pole, they weren't as low as when he'd chosen the specialty. The interns still seemed to like him, putting up with his quaint twentieth-centu-

ry insistence that they close their Palm Pilots and rely on their brains instead of Epocrates. Ken was right. He never wanted to retire. For what?

The morning after the flight, blinding white light pulled him out of a restless sleep. He'd had murky dreams—wraiths of his own past rather than the usual accident patients and relatives waiting for The Word. His spilled-open suitcase was the only imperfection in an otherwise immaculate room, with white sheers, an overstuffed duvet, and a spa bathrobe hanging neatly tied around the middle. At the sink were French soaps and a single hydrangea blossom in a crystal vase, the doings of Juanita, who lived here year round, keeping the place sparkling and serving meals to Ken and his visitors whenever they appeared.

He was cotton-headed from the tranquilizer. He still used good old vitamin V out of custom. His fear of flying had moderated, like everything else, to a trace of its former intensity. The last time he'd looked at the pilot's door with the barely controlled urge to hammer on it and beg them to land somewhere, anywhere, *now*, for god's sake, Mona had been sitting beside him and was still wifely enough to make fun of him and talk him down. That made it over five years ago.

18

He needed an espresso. Juanita should already be up.

The den was pleasantly darker than the bedroom. It resembled a mead hall with heavy beams, primitive furniture, and a two-wall library. On these visits, Ashley always read Ken's books—an exercise in inconsequentiality since they were an assortment of Danish medical texts of the late 1800s, Victorian poetry, *The Compleat Sir Walter Raleigh*, and old atlases with foldout maps, all arranged and set about in stacks and on shelves by Ken's decorator. In the dimness it took Ashley several seconds to notice that someone was lying on the oversized leather couch. His back was turned. Boxer shorts ballooned haplessly from his jeans. A gold card, set of keys, cell phone, and a crumbled wad of pesos littered the coffee table.

Ashley tiptoed closer and leaned over the man. He was ginger-haired. The man looked familiar, but Ashley couldn't get a fix on his features. It wasn't until the Pedregal security guard arrived, phoned by Juanita, that the intruder finally roused and sat up.

"Hello," the man said. "Welcome...Welcome to my most embarrassing moment." He was the taller and louder of the two airplane drunks.

The young security man and Juanita conferred in Spanish. They sounded as if they were more interested in serving him coffee than arresting him.

The man stood, tucked in his shirt, and picked up his cell phone and keys. "Malcolm," he said, extending his hand to Ashley. Ashley noticed that his eyes were slightly out of line. He also had sliced scars on his forearms and neck. "Sorry I crashed on you here. A friend's house is nearby, and I . . . I don't know." He blinked at the wall of books with a little frown. "Tang musta seen all those books and run."

The security man had stopped conferring with Juanita and came toward the intruder with a big grin. "You wit' Tang, man?"

"No, no, we were just taking a walk. She's a buddy. You a surfer?"

"You see Tang on the cover? She a crippler chick, man!" the security man said, grinning even more broadly.

"Yeah. Cameras like her in the barrel." The man bent over and picked up the rest of his stuff. "Again, sorry. Can I take you out to breakfast? I know a good local."

As he was turning down the invitation, Ashley noticed a look of recognition and wonder cross the security man's face. "Malcolm Tripp! You the Tripp!"

"Guilty as charged." He glanced up at Ashley. "Breakfast? It's on me."

19

"No, thank you. Juanita already has breakfast."

"Sí, breakfast ready, come, come," she said. The security man left with Malcolm Tripp, and Ashley watched through a front window as he got Tripp's autograph and invited him into his car, doubtless to take him to his lost house.

That afternoon, Ashley drove his brother's Mercedes to his favorite little beach just south of Los Cabos. It was a low-key surfing beach with a laid-back restaurant and no jewelry peddlers. He ordered a Bloody Mary with two olives and tried to get into his Scandinavian police novel. He liked the frigid landscapes and bleak milieu. Mona had called him "the Swede" for a while, at first jokingly, but later less so.

The two of them had been living apart, still undivorced, for over five years. Mona had her share of eccentricities. Third-generation Californian, she was more than three times California, having grown up rich, floated in the purple haze in her twenties, become a self-improving jock who turned into a relentless triathlete in her thirties, and, by her fifties, become a fragile, hypochondriacal iron woman, still riding and swimming and gimping across the finish line, a few filaments of cartilage away from knee and hip replacements. She could joke about it, but she could also call Ashley at two in the morning,

drunk, with shin splints and an overdrawn account. Until recently he would have taken her back if she had asked. Now he wouldn't. At least that much had been decided. Now they were still married only because they lacked the energy to disentangle their finances. He had bought her a modest bungalow just a block from the Atherton line, which unfortunately added two hundred thousand to its cost. He also still put money into her account monthly.

Seven years ago Ashley had been a rich doctor with a house whose value seemed to increase by the month. Now he worried he'd have to borrow money when he finally went through with the divorce.

He watched the fearless teenagers surfing—boys with long hair and puka shells around their necks almost looking like they were out of the sixties, girls in micro-mini bikinis wearing such distant, benevolent looks you'd think they were perfectly caked. As the waves broke, they bounced up almost in unison and zigzagged, complaisantly running over each other. Ashley realized that he had never been youthful. Fearful of making a bad choice, he had done everything late—driving, drinking, girls. Even now, even at this late age, he was still Mr. Not Yet.

20 He ordered a second Bloody Mary. Malcolm Tripp had somehow found his telephone number and invited him to a party that evening. He had declined, expecting to tuck into his novel. Maybe he should go, for variety if nothing else. There was a whole week for books. After talking to Malcolm, he had Googled him, and sixty pages of references and images had popped up. Malcolm was a surfer who'd made his name in the early nineties in extreme surfing, riding impossible waves, helping invent what they called "aerials." He was a few years older than Ashley had thought. There were wet suits and a line of surf wear called "Tripps," and he'd been profiled in a documentary called *Glass House*. In the pictures, he was younger and thinner, more chiseled—what even Mona, with her jock lens, would call a perfect specimen.

He didn't give the party another thought until after he'd eaten Juanita's calorie-conscious dinner and was sitting on the bedroom balcony, watching a tourist pirate ship far below sailing toward the tip, its salsa music bouncing off the cliffs. He'd go to Tripp's party, if only to catch a little local color. He put on a blue linen shirt, chinos, and well-worn huaraches, ran a brush through his hair, and walked down the steep cobblestone streets, past the eerily mosque-like architecture that made Pedregal look more like Morocco than Mexico. He found the cobra-shaped rock formation that marked the house. The front door was partly open, and he slipped into a foyer with the vaulted ceiling of a

cathedral. Music coming from the house was hip-hop. There were high heels and flip-flops all over the floor, and a rack with a half-dozen surfboards. He kicked off his sandals and padded barefoot toward the noise.

The living room exceeded Kenneth's in showiness. Potted palms reached the ceiling. Medieval tapestries of virgins and friars, statues of monks and saints, and swords with gilded handles were presided over by a huge television on the wall pouring financial news onto seemingly unconcerned party-goers—the men mostly in T-shirts and board shorts, the women gauzy and flowing in peasant dresses and mod sheaths. For the second time that day, Ashley had the feeling that styles were forty-some-years retro but more chic, designer rather than thrift store. Ashley felt a cool hand on the back of his neck. "Hey landlord, you made it. *Mi casa es su casa*, even if it ain't *mi casa*. Can I fix you up? What's your pleasure?"

At the wet bar, Ashley took a Corona. A topless woman streaked past and went out a sliding glass door. Malcolm gave him a look. "The real party seems to be outside."

Ashley asked him who their hosts were, and Malcolm said that it was a guy he surfed with, Enrique Rodriguez. Ashley had heard his brother speak of the Rodriguezes as the "cement family."

21

"Enrique's cool," Malcolm said, with a suggestion of irony. "He's wacko about surfin'. Called me one day and told me he'd send a plane for me. Wanted to learn to do a three-sixty in a week. Offered much merriment and an infusion into my dwindling bank account to come down and teach him."

A woman with artfully tousled blonde hair and radiant skin slinked up behind Malcolm and put her hands around his waist. She was wearing a white artist's shirt over a pair of black leggings. "Guess who?"

"Scarlett Johansson?"

"Dickwad. Scarlett's got a giant ass in waiting. Put your hand on this." She rolled around him and moved his hand to her ass and jiggled it as if to make certain that he got the true feel.

"*Caliente*. It'd look hot in jodhpurs," he said with a smile, and she pulled away and started to leave as quickly as she'd arrived.

She turned at the door. "By the way, you better come to me in Los Angeles or I'll be mad at you. I've got *the* healer man, the best—"

"Thanks, thanks," he smiled and waved a hand at her.

As she left, Ashley was trying to remember her name. She was a sitcom actress. "She looks like—"

"It is. Sheila. The hospital show. Sheila ain't the usual TV flake, though. She's as bad as Enrique into surfin'. These people. Are you married?"

"Sorta," Ashley said, hesitating. "Not really."

Malcolm laughed. "One of those deals, huh? Stick around, we'll talk later. I want to ask you some doctor questions." He punched Ashley's shoulder and disappeared out the door.

The party became more interesting to Ashley as the night went on. The crowd in the kitchen was noshing on smoked salmon and talking about everything from surfing in Vietnam to the bad job market and how hard it was to get by in New York City. "Thirty-something and still on the dole," said one of the young women to him, giving him a flirtatious look. She raised a beer, "To Mom and Dad!"

"To Mom and Dad!" Ashley joined in.

"You a dad?" she asked him. She looked familiar, but he couldn't remember where he'd seen her. She held out a hand to shake.

"Never made it," he said. "But I do teach."

"Where?"

22 He told her that he taught at U Cal Hospital in San Francisco, and her smile widened. "Oh! You're the one with the big house where Malc slept."

"Unfortunately it isn't my big house. It's my brother's. But you're Tang, the famous surfer lady?"

"Right. So fame. Let's go outside." The enclosed yard was grass and a multilevel garden of cactuses with yellow flowers, blue palms, and pointed agave with explosions of primeval flowers. The main pool had a running waterfall constructed above a lap pool that that led up to it. The house surrounded the garden on three sides.

Tang looked at him questioningly. "Has he talked to you yet?"

In this ornate place, Ashley began to enjoy himself. About half the women were topless, and there was a crowd of nude swimmers, yelling at others to take off their clothes. For almost five years Ashley hadn't dated or slept with anyone. Friends at the hospital tried to get him to do matchups on the Internet but he hadn't taken them up on it. Here was a whole bouquet of people laughing and jostling and drunk and not caring. A young man with heavy eyelids was sitting on the diving board in a pair of wet white briefs, vaguely holding a drink in one hand and gazing with a blottoed grin in the general direction of the naked ones. "That's Enrique," Tang said. "Too much candy again. I'm afraid he might accidentally go swimming."

Ashley kept his eye on the dim expression of the prince of the cement empire. "Looks a little pharmaceutically enhanced there."

Tang smiled. "Oh, Enrique's all-star tonight. He's in hideout mode. Red and blue and all the other colors, too. He got down to his underwear, then he couldn't figure out how to take them off. A little angelic myself, but just a little." She then proceeded without hesitation to unzip her shorts and take them and her underpants off in a single swipe, then to pull off her T-shirt and smile at him. "Don't worry about him. Enjoy." She stood there for just a moment, stark naked, looking at him. "You know, Malcolm wants to talk to you."

He tried to keep his eyes on her face. "About what?"

She frowned and started to say something. "So you don't know why he ended up in your house? Hmm. I thought he told you." She turned and dived into the pool.

Inspired by her, Ashley followed suit, stripping and jumping into the swimming pool. When he came up, out of nowhere he felt strangely happy and deeply sad at the same moment, without any idea why. At once happier and sadder than he could remember having felt in years. Perhaps there was something to this nude thing. Tang was standing in front of him in the pool wiping back her short hair and blinking, with light from the pool coming up between her breasts. She was glancing over at Enrique, who was still sitting unmoved in his stunned position on the board, looking like if he leaned a centimeter farther forward, he'd fall in.

23

"Our host needs to get off the plank," Ashley said. Tang swam over to Enrique and held onto the board and pushed on one side of his chest. "Hey, Ricky-Ricky. I'm tired of worrying about you. Get up to one of the chairs."

After she'd poked and cajoled Enrique into crawling back off the board and crashing into a lounge chair, she swam back over and stood in front of him again. "Malcolm ended up staying at your house because he had a seizure. I didn't go inside with him so I didn't hear about it until the next day."

"He's an epileptic?" Ashley asked. "That's not very safe for a surfer—"

She wiped her hair back again and looked around, then looked directly at him. "Malcolm has brain cancer. The last doctor he saw told him that he'll be lucky to get two more months. And even then..."

"I didn't know," Ashley said, trying to gather his thoughts. It was hard to get properly into doctor consciousness with the midsection of this particular well-lit, well-made naked woman eighteen inches from his face. "Microsurgery is out of the question?"

“He’s been to one cancer doctor and the guy just shrugged. He acts like he doesn’t care. No second opinion. Nothing.”

“Who doesn’t care? Malcolm?”

“It’s like oh well, I’m dying, and so that’s what it’s got to be. I think he’ll talk to you.”

“I’m not a pathologist or an oncologist.”

“He’s caught inside. Brain freeze. But he believes in signs and stuff. He ended up in your house, and he feels a connection. Just talk to him.”

At that moment, the actor Sheila, now also naked, came up to Tang and gave her a knowing look. “Our host is fubar, *sista*. See that mouth. He’s trying to catch bugs.”

“Enrique’s been stuffed for three days. You take care of him. I got him off the diving board.”

“Speaking of which—”

At that moment Malcolm walked out on the diving board sporting a strangely sweet smile. He finished off a beer and made a quiet burp. He looked over at Tang and Sheila and pointed toward them with a little finger. “You girls scaring the doctor with all that body sheen? Ain’t it beautiful, Dr. Ash.”

Tang turned to Sheila with tears suddenly brimming out of her eyes. “This is so bogus. I’m over the falls, so what. I’m a goner. Toughie, toughie.” She glanced at Ashley. “I could kill the fuck.”

Two days later Ashley and Malcolm sat on a beach eight miles north of Pedregal. Tang had gone on a pensive walk up the beach, watching the surfers. She had hardly said a word on the drive up from Cabo. Ashley had seen her once since the party, after inviting her and Malcolm up to the house for breakfast and getting only her. Between the swimming pool and the scrambled eggs, he had become illogically, haplessly infatuated with her, a circumstance pitiful enough at age fifty-nine that he had sworn to himself he would not show even a hint of it, which had made him less than sparkling company at breakfast. It was an emotional oddity, a temporary state, happening for understandable reasons: her brooding melancholy and need, her naked body in the swimming pool, his nearly five-year abstinence from any kind of meaningful relationship. He’d taken the pathology reports that she’d sneaked out of Malcolm’s drawer. Later that day he’d talked by phone with a cancer specialist in San Francisco, going over the details with him. Tang had arranged this trip to the beach so he could talk Malcolm into seeking

treatment, no matter what the pathology reports said. Whatever they said, it was obvious to her. You fight it. You get other opinions. You don't just grin and accept a death sentence.

But Malcolm seemed uninterested in medical information or opinions. "Surfing's a drug," he said, with his odd little smile. Tang was down the beach, and he and Ashley were sitting, staring at three-foot waves, passing a joint back and forth. Ashley hadn't smoked in two or three years. Malcolm seemed to want to talk about other things for a while. "It's all changed. Everything. Aerials, yeah, yeah, they're good, but sometimes I almost wish we didn't start the Jet Ski thing. You're out there at Todos Santos or Santa Cruz or someplace and it's like thirty Jet Skis zooming in all directions.... More weed, Dr. Ash?"

Ashley took it from him. Tang was about a hundred feet away, staring onto the green.

"I knew a guy named Balder. He hung out at Maverick's at Half Moon Bay. There it is, twenty-five, thirty miles from Stanford, and it's Deathville. Either no good at all or cold, steep, spooky Deathville. It's not friendly. This commando Balder is trying to get me into it. Eight-hundred-pound slicers are zipping all around us, and I'm kinda thinking mmm, *this* is fun? Fuck up and you're axed is what it is. All the Jet Skis, and it's no longer existential, it's techno existential, which seems like a contradiction. So Balder's on a nice clean wave and he misses the kick out and lands face first on the reef. That's Maverick's. Forget where you are for two seconds and hello. He comes up with his nose punched forty-five degrees to the side and a forehead spouting blood. I help him in, and he's laughin' all the way, losing blood at a medical rate with his nose sideways, and what does he want to do? He wants to go out again immediately. He's been stuffed, he's been maytagged, and he wants back out.

"I'm cold even in my Antarctic suit and thinking no. Fuck. This is grim. The whole thing. I call somebody over to get me to keep him off the water and we're fighting him, and all of a sudden, I say screw it, so go, you surf Nazi, but at least pull your nose straight first. And so he does a little Band-Aiding up and goes back out. And I'm gettin' in a way foul mood. But then—" he looked at Ashley as he handed him back the joint—"the air is dimmer and dimmer, the pressure's dropping—do this long enough and you get an internal barometer, and you can feel it within a couple millibars—and the wave interval's getting longer. And then the water starts dumpin', and I mean dumpin'. It turns out we had a way low and a powerful high crunching right

together, and I'm watching waves go from thirty-five feet on the face to forty-five to sixty feet, wondering what is this, a tsunami or something."

Malcolm looked over at Ashley with his slightly out-of-focus eyes, still with the little smile, and Ashley passed the joint back to him. "The guys on the Jet Skis are not sure. Some of 'em are coming in. Others are zipping around, unable to figure whether to go in or out. It's washing out all the camera setups, everybody running around trying to get away. And I'm aching from being lacerated about six times already, watching Balder eat it again, and with this thing still lurking in my mind, thinking about the life I've chosen. Three or four others come over, and we're staring, not knowing what to say about this sudden epic shit in our face. I mean we are ace, dead wordless.

26 "Sooo...I'm not thinking much but just pick up the board and snag a ride and go out, and we wait at the edge and I see one coming, and it's not exactly real, it's more a dream, a brain shape, and I lurk a while, then I have him pull me in and I pitch at the takeoff and slide down the line, and I'm in the barrel for one, two, three, maybe four perfect moments and running for the door. Sure I'm hypnotized, but I know that if I don't get out quick, this house gonna fall on me. And I do, I make it out and have my hands and legs. I wouldn't have believed that wave if there weren't twenty people shooting me. Ha!" He smiled at Ashley with a strange sadness. "But it isn't the perfect ride I'm talking about, Dr. Ash. It isn't being famous for another ten minutes. I'm saying that it comes without warning, maybe at your low point, maybe when you're beat down so far you don't even think you can do it any more, and right then it can come. Right at the worst and you're looking at it. And you don't even know that you're about to hitch one of the biggest rogues ever seen at this place and also you don't even particularly *want* to do it at the moment. Bad ass is here though, and you better take it. Let yourself out there. Don't you think so, Doc?"

Ashley was staring down the beach at Tang, who had turned and was walking slowly toward them.

Malcolm was smiling toward Tang, and Ashley noticed the slightly crossed eyes again and the head tilt. Coming out to the beach he'd already seen the ataxic walk. His speech was still okay, with just a hint of slurring, which Ashley had first assumed was due to drinking. He was trying to say to Malcolm what Tang wanted him to say. The problem was that Malcolm made it impossible to lie.

"I think so," he said. "Let yourself out there. You're right."

“And you know something else,” Malcolm looked at him. “I didn’t have to travel around the world on some ad gig to find this wave, but my whole life was waiting for it. There’s some kind of lesson there. Balder knew, that idiot. There he was with his nose sideways, laughing, saying, ‘This is it. Take it. The God pocket is here, man.’” He looked over again with the little smile. “So what’s the prognosis, Dr. Ash?”

Ashley looked at him but didn’t know how to start or quite what to say. He had served in an emergency room for thirty-one years and answered every imaginable kind of medical question and given plenty of bad news, but he didn’t want to answer this one. He didn’t want to make the pronouncement that Malcolm already knew.

Tang was close enough to hear him. “I say you’re right. Totally. Live every moment. Enjoy yourself. Don’t waste your time chasing specialists in Outer Mongolia.”

“See? See Tang-o. Dr. Ash knows,” Malcolm said, looking up at her with one eye closed into the afternoon sun and the crooked grin.

Tang stood there for a moment looking as if he had hit her with a shovel. Stunned. She put her face in her hands and cried silently, stumbling slightly to the side, almost falling. Ashley knew not to try to say anything comforting to her.

27

Three hours later, he was standing alone on his brother’s swimming pool terrace looking out on the ocean a hundred feet below. The sun was setting and the sailboats and fishing boats were heading by for the harbor. He was thinking about how Tang and Malcolm had acted on the drive back. Malcolm had been perfectly cheerful, while Tang was devastated. The couple of times she gave him the eye, she looked angry and betrayed. He wished he had been able to do as she wanted, send them on a miracle quest for a cure for his cancer. But Malcolm didn’t want to be lied to, and he didn’t want to hear about getting two or three more months of agony out of chemo and radiation therapy. He certainly didn’t want to hear that he was unusually young for the kind of cancer he had. Ashley wouldn’t want to hear that if it was his diagnosis. This was an issue on which he differed from the young doctors, who dealt out their death sentences with what they proudly called full exposure, which in fact meant camouflaging it in percentiles and medical gobbledygook. Ashley occasionally used the good old ostrich method. If a person wanted the death sentence spoken aloud, okay, but some people clearly didn’t.

The pirate ship was going by, the Mighty Mighty Bosstones bouncing off the cliff, “*We leave the place thoroughly wrecked, / Travel, travel, we’re starting to unravel...*”

Ashley finished a glass of wine and wiped at his face as if to try to rid himself of the strange things that were happening in his head. Since sitting on the beach today, his thoughts and feelings had been curious. Something about Malcolm himself—this person he’d first seen on the plane as an early middle-aged California male idiot—had set off a peculiar train of feelings and thoughts. It wasn’t due to his infatuation with Tang or having to talk to Malcolm about his illness. It was some other thing. Four hours later—after a shower and supper and an attempt to read *Quentin Durward*—he was in the same mood, only worse, once again standing outdoors. He recalled how he’d felt in the swimming pool, terrifically sad and happy at once. Just about the time he realized that he needed to talk again with Malcolm, his cell phone rang and he answered.

“Hello, so-called doctor.”

“Tang?”

28 “No, it’s not Tang. It’s Sheila. Do you wanta talk to Tang, because, believe me, she doesn’t want to talk to you.”

“Okay.”

“She wants you like she wants to go on a Bahaman cruise with Dr. Death.”

“Got ya. Sorry. How can I help you?”

“Come down to the house, please. Don’t ask questions, just come.”

“You’re so alpha. I didn’t think actresses were that way.”

She hesitated. “Don’t talk smart. I ain’t supposed to like you. Come down here.”

Three hours later Ashley was writing e-mails to the director of emergency services at SFG asking for a family-emergency leave of absence. He called his brother Kenneth and asked if he could stay at the house a while longer.

“Sure. Juanita gets lonely,” Kenneth said. “But I thought you never took time off. I thought you were a slave to the clock and fixed vacations. This wouldn’t have something to do with a female of the species, would it?”

“Female, no. I’ve successfully clicked off all the females in my vicinity. It’s a sort of...mortality crisis.”

“Mortality? You mean plain, regular mortality crisis, not some kind of weird mental thing we’re talking about?”

“Regular. Pretty regular, I guess.”

“Death-is-around-the-corner-two-inches-away kind of thing?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, that’s okay then. That’s good. Maybe you’ll hit the jackpot.”

“What jackpot is that?”

“You’ll see, young brother, you’ll see. Have fun.”

Two days later, what had happened that night happened again. Around noon, Malcolm had a grand mal seizure lasting about one minute. Ashley had given him a single phenobarbital to lessen the chance of status epilepticus. Everyone in the house had become somber and even sober, including Enrique. In that unusual state, the inheritor of the cement empire was gentle, helpful, melancholy, and almost shy. He was very worried about Malcolm, as was everybody who happened by the house. Ashley had somehow fallen into directing things. He told them that Malcolm needed to be free of company except when he wanted it. Nothing was worse for a person having seizures than questioning them, trying to get them to remember and explain things, a procedure that Ashley was convinced came from the approach of “keeping awake” people who have undergone severe physical trauma. It only served to make someone more seizure prone.

29

When he came around in the afternoon, Enrique and Sheila made dinner—rice, beans, tacos. “I figured you wanted something boring,” Sheila said, looking up at Malcolm with a tenuous smile. He was sitting propped up in his bed. Tang sat in a chair near Ashley looking deflated. She still seemed angry and upset and wasn’t saying much.

“Boring hell,” Malcolm muttered. “Give me cherry pie. If you’re axed, eat whatever you want. I’ll never be fat again. Fuck the advertisers.”

Sheila looked at Enrique. “Where do we get cherry pie?”

“I don’t know. The bakery has tres leches cake. That has cherries.”

“How ’bout some Norwegian pussy?” Malcolm asked. “Can you get me that?”

Enrique looked at him seriously. “I’ll try. Yeah. You mean real...like a girl?”

Malcolm laughed. Ashley was sitting in an antique oak chair by the window. “Dr. Ash, this is a great racket. All you hafta do is declare yourself outgoing and you get anything you want.” Enrique was leaving the room, as if to go in search of the requested items. “I was just kiddin’, Ricky. I wouldn’t know what to do with a Norwegian girl if I had one.”

Enrique remained in the doorway. "Do you still want some dessert?"

"You come out of those spells awfully well," Ashley said.

"I'm a healthy athletic dying son of a bitch."

"You also are cursing well. That's a good sign. Keep that up and you'll last forever."

"Appreciate the compliments, Doctor. Look, I tell you what let's do. I've got an idea."

An hour later, mid-afternoon, the five of them were at a beach near Palmilla, just south of Ashley's favorite beach bar. The sky was a cloudless cerulean and the surf impressive. Sheila and Tang were talking together, looking uncertain and worried.

Malcolm seemed quite cheerful as he gazed out at the surf. "What do you think, Ricky? Are they valid?"

Enrique stared at the water. "It's good for here."

"Wanta learn how to surf, Doctor? Tang, you up?"

Tang shook her head. "Not feeling surfy, Malcolm."

30 "Come on, Ricky boy. Let's take him out. Get us some boards." Malcolm nodded toward a man with a truck parked up the beach offering rental gear.

"I don't think you should go into the water," Ashley said.

"Why?"

"Because you had a seizure about three hours ago."

"You know something, Doctor, far as I'm concerned that's just one more reason to do it."

Ashley grinned at him. "I'm with you. I understand. I just don't think it's a good idea."

"Come on, Malcolm," Tang said irritably. "You heard him. Please. Let's just go back."

Malcolm insisted, they argued more, with Tang finally telling him that if he wanted to kill himself go ahead, she was sick of worrying about him. But then when he started to walk into the surf, she tried to stop him again, more tearfully and furiously, and with a gentle, serious expression he said something to her that Ashley didn't hear. She gave up, walking up to Ashley, who was holding a surfboard. "Look, I'm sick of playing the desperate girl. I quit. Go ahead and let him kill himself, *Doctor*. First you tell him not to get any medical help, then you help kill him. Just go ahead."

He watched her walk up the beach. He thought about telling her the details but she didn't want to know that Malcolm didn't just have one doc-

tor's opinion but scans, diagnoses, and blood work from four specialists. He had a malignant brainstem glioma that was inoperable. He might live a couple of months, at best, but under increasingly unpleasant circumstances. The old careful, professional doctor wanted to say these things to her, but she didn't want to hear them.

The three of them—Malcolm, Enrique, and Ashley—ended up in the surf. Ashley had never been on a surfboard, and Enrique helped him through the breaking waves. They paddled out about seventy-five yards, beyond the breaks. Ashley did what they did, sitting on the board. Malcolm paddled close, wiped at his face, and grinned at him. "Girls ain't comin'?"

"No girls," Ashley said. "I'm afraid Tang's calling the cops on me."

"Tang's stubborn, but she'll get over it. You know, she's a good woman, Doctor. A real good woman." He smiled at him. "And she's not a kid. She's thirty-nine years old, and I worry about her going into the surfin' sinkhole."

"Ye he! The surfin' sinkhole!" Enrique said, as a biggish wave rolled under them.

"Show him how to stand up, Ricky. I want to see the doctor catch his first wave."

31

Enrique demonstrated how to rise up with two hands grasping the side of the board, and how to stand, one foot brought quickly ahead. He stood on his board as if it was no trouble at all to maintain balance, even with waves rolling beneath them.

Malcolm gazed on with a smile, laughing when Ashley tried it and fell in. "Hey, that's good. You were up three or four seconds before you tipped. It's seconds, Doctor. That's what counts." After Ashley climbed back onto his board, Malcolm swished his arm in the water. "Out here they're called capillaries. You ever heard that?"

"No," Ashley said, shivering slightly from the wind. Their boards were all three close together, aiming outward.

"The beginning of the waves," Malcolm said, staring toward the horizon. "They go toward shore, drag the bottom, and get closer together and taller. Steeper inclines tend to make them bigger. They start breaking when the water is about one and a third deeper than the wave. There's other stuff like the surge and so on, but those are the basics..." Malcolm looked away from Ashley toward the horizon and in a different tone said, "Shouldn't I be trained for this shit? Shouldn't I be good at it?"

"At what?" When Malcolm didn't answer he said, "You mean at being sick?"

“Shouldn’t I be fierce? I’ve been chewed up all over the world. I’ve been shredded so many times that they could donate my skin to an alligator farm. I’ve been caught under rocks, I’ve been knocked out, I’ve had my lungs pumped. Shouldn’t I be fucking good at this?” For the first time, Ashley saw the fear in his face.

He wanted to tell Malcolm that for thirty years of his working life he’d been dealing with mortality in the emergency room and that, instead of getting more accustomed to it, for many years he had grown more fearful. He’d developed a nice little armoire of phobias and obsessions—fear of riding in cars with other people driving, fear of flying, fear of change, fear of retiring. Of late, they had mellowed, if only from the general slowing down of everything else at his age, although he knew they could come roaring back at any time. He wanted to tell him that the presence or lack of fear wasn’t logical. But that wasn’t for now. “From what I’ve seen as a doctor, the people the most afraid are the ones with the smallest problems. The big fears tend to take care of themselves. It’s just like you taking your wave. Let’s quit talking about it. Teach me how to surf.”

32 Malcolm pointed a finger at him and grinned. “Shame on you, Doctor. Ain’t you afraid I’ll drown? The women are afraid I’ll drown.”

“Thank them for caring,” Ashley said with a smile. “You’re lucky somebody does. In fact, why don’t you go back to the beach and be nice. Rick can show me this.”

Malcolm paddled over close to him, their boards bumping together, and he leaned toward Ashley. “So you’ll stick around, Doctor?”

Ashley nodded. “I’m here as long as you want me. Between you and Rick, though, you got to teach me to surf.”

“Yo brah! Let yourself out there.”

“Yo brah!” Rick shouted with him. “Something comin’.”

Malcolm started paddling, looking over his shoulder, and then he stood up on his board and caught a wave, talking back toward the two of them as easily as if he was standing on a kitchen floor. “Rick and I are going to take you inside the tube, we gonna take you to the pope’s living room, Dr. Ash.”

Enrique, riding up on the next swell, glanced at Ashley and looked away. For a long time he looked away and then he looked back and tried to smile. “Okay, Doctor. Let’s get you out there.”