

Thin Air

Gam sipped his coffee and wondered if this time Lemon and Nuggie would finally come to blows. They started before dawn, which woke Gam from a fitful sleep, and they brought the fight into the kitchen while Gam was making breakfast. Like most of their arguments, it was hard to tell what the issue was — something to do with setting up the kid’s room — but now Nuggie was yelling about whether they should even be having children, an awkward notion, since Lemon was already past nine months.

Nuggie wasn’t a violent guy, but he was acting scarier than usual. “Clementine, you crazy bitch!” he yelled. Lemon glared at him, standing with her legs apart, leaning back, hands bracing her lower back, looking impossibly pregnant. She was a diminutive woman, and it seemed to Gam that the baby had grown unnaturally large. People seeing Lemon’s condition would say, “Oh, he’s gonna be a bruiser!” Lemon would give them her best stink eye, and they would move on, glancing back at the tiny woman with a belly the size of a cement mixer.

“You’re the crazy bitch,” she said, in a menacing tone. “You sayin’ I’m a bad mom?”

Gam looked at Nuggie, whose whole body was shaking. Nuggie caught Gam’s eye and muttered, “You ain’t no fuckin’ mother yet.”

“Oh, I’m not?” Lemon took a few steps toward Nuggie, sticking her belly out even farther. “What the hell is this, a goddam tumor?”

Nuggie turned away and started slamming cupboard doors, looking for a mug. Gam poured him some coffee and handed it to him. He took it and perched on one of the aluminum stools. For a moment, the only sounds were Lemon’s panting and Nuggie slurping his coffee.

“God, I wish you’d learn to drink normally,” Lemon whispered, just loud enough to be heard.

“You what?” Nuggie growled.

“Nothing,” said Lemon, backing into a chair and sitting down with a groan.

The relative silence might be Gam’s only chance to intervene. “Guys,” he said, “Maybe we should go for a drive.”

Nobody said anything. “We’re all getting cabin fever. Let’s get out of here.”

Nuggie shifted on his stool and Lemon breathed heavily.

“Look,” said Gam, as pleasantly as he could manage, “I made some eggs. Let’s leave the apartment as is for a while. Drive up into the mountains. Get some air.” As he spoke, he filled a pair of plates and slapped them onto the formica table. He was pouring orange juice when Lemon and Nuggie, heads down, began to eat. There was no further talk.

Later, Gam cleaned up the kitchen. Nuggie and Lemon argued about what things one might long for while driving in the mountains. It was still morning when they were all settled in Nuggie’s four-door ’63 Chrysler, which he called Jesus (giving it the Spanish pronunciation to avoid an eternity in some hell exceeding his present conditions).

Jesus pulled out of the carport and began wallowing through the city toward I-70, the nearest escape route from the Denver flatlands. Lemon sat next to Nuggie on the broad sofa-like front seat, picking through an enormous hand-bag in search of a nose moisturizer, and Gam sprawled diagonally across the back seat, one elbow propped on the open window, his head tilted so he could watch the tops of buildings slide across the featureless blue sky. The roar of the wind drowned out sporadic carpings from the front seat.

As they accelerated down the interstate on-ramp, Lemon looked up from her purse and said, “Where the hell are we going?”

“Mountains,” said Nuggie.

Lemon peered at the sprawling blocks of single-family homes for a while. “Where are the fucking mountains?”

Nuggie gave her a long look and said, “West. All the mountains are to the West. Everything is fucking West.”

Gam twisted himself forward and leaned over the front seat into the

gap between them and said, “Nuggie, would you please keep your eyeballs on the fucking road?”

Nuggie turned well past 90 degrees to look Gam in the eye. “You mean like this?”

Gam pushed himself onto the back seat again. “If you drive like that in the mountains we won’t last more than half a minute, ass-hole.”

“Yeah, ass-hole,” Lemon said, returning to her purse.

The interstate wound through the city, took a lazy sweeping turn to the South for a few miles, and then turned West and headed abruptly up into the Rockies. It was a wide, fast highway all the way to Idaho Springs, with massive peaks in the distance all around them.

“Garden of the Gods?” said Lemon. “I want to see the Garden of the Gods.”

“Not today,” said Nuggie.

“Why the hell not?” said Lemon, gearing up for another showdown.

“That’s in the Springs,” he said. “Hours from here. Way South.”

“Oh,” said Lemon, deflated. “Well, fuck it then.”

“Another time, eh?” said Gam from the back seat. Lemon turned to look him in the eye, but he was already watching the mountains again and didn’t see her.

They got off the interstate in Idaho Springs, a narrow town about four blocks wide and a couple of miles long. Almost immediately Nuggie turned left onto Colorado route 103.

“So where the hell are we going?” Lemon demanded. “Isn’t it lunch yet? There’s restaurants here; I can see them.”

“Mt. Evans,” said Nuggie. “We can eat there.”

“What’s Mt. Evans?” said Lemon. Gam leaned forward again, interested.

“I don’t know,” said Nuggie. “A mountain, duh. It’s the highest paved road in North America. Taylor told me about it at work.”

“I thought Pikes Peak was the highest,” said Gam.

“It’s not paved,” said Nuggie, proud of his expertise as a new resident of the Rockies.

Now they were fully in the mountains, no longer just admiring them from a distance. Route 103 was no interstate highway. It was smoothly paved, but only two lanes, with occasional turnouts to allow passing. It

wound along an increasingly narrow ridge, due West, toward a massive peak that loomed in the distance. The terrain fell off on either side of the road, and Gam slid toward the center of the Chrysler's wide overstuffed seat. Nuggie spent less time watching the scenery. They passed a sign reading "Road Closed Sept. 1."

"That's tomorrow," said Lemon. "How far do we have to go? I'm really getting hungry."

"Taylor said 30 miles," said Nuggie.

"I'm always hungry," said Lemon.

"Why close the road on September first?" said Gam.

Nuggie didn't reply. The road had been fairly straight for some time, but now it wound around a few wrinkles in the ridge, which was growing more precipitous on both sides.

"Maybe snow," said Lemon. "We should have gotten a tour brochure or something."

"It's a little early for snow," said Gam. "Maybe landslides."

The road took a few more bends and straightened out again. Then they came upon a few torturous switchbacks, 180-degree hairpin turns as the ridge contorted to round what looked like a major mountain. A sign read "Echo Lake 5 Miles" and soon they were driving right up the side of the mountain, back and forth, as the road followed the contours.

"Is this Mt. Evans?" said Gam, trying to see up the mountain without getting too close to the windows.

"Naah," said Nuggie. "Gotta be after the lake. Taylor didn't mention any lake, but Mt. Evans is the end of the line. He said just drive till you get to the top, so that's what I'm doing."

The switchbacks became more extreme and the big car dove and plunged for an implausibly long five miles, and then descended a little into a green region alongside a large lake of deep blue water with campgrounds and a few parked cars.

After the lake, there were long straight stretches with only a few sharp turns, and then the trees gave way to rock-strewn hillsides and vast meadows of wiry grass and low bushes. Ahead they could see the road, and where it was going. They were very high up already, but the road curved past a smaller peak, and then turned steeply upward into a tangle

of twisted pavement cut into the side of the real mountain, with a tiny rock construction just visible at the very top.

“Jesus,” said Nuggie. “We’ve got to drive up that?”

“Just keep your eyes on the fucking road,” said Lemon.

Gam said nothing, but he wondered if it was too late to turn around.

There were other cars behind them, and a few in front, and no pullouts, so there was no choice but to commit and push the big sedan on through the boulders and alpine meadows into the sky. No one spoke as the car worked its way up into the mid-day autumn mists, but the engine roared as it sucked the dwindling air into oxygen-starved carburetors.

Driving up the side of Mt. Evans, the summit was no longer visible above them. The sun blazed from a sharp blue sky, cloudless, and with each bend in the serpentine road, still miraculously paved in smooth black tarmac, another sprawl of mountains swung into view. All three were speechless. They had never seen such mountains, many of them reaching well over two miles high, much less had they found themselves moving around on the very sides of one, threading along a narrow strip of pavement that led so steeply to the very top.

From the first U-turn at the final ascent, eleven more full reversals brought them to the parking lot at 14,000 feet. It was full of cars, but Nuggie found a gap for Jesus across from the weird stone tourist center. The sign at the end of the road called it Crest House. Behind the restaurant, higher up, was the Mt. Evans summit, a few hundred feet beyond a small field of rocks and gravel, topped by a pair of small A-frame buildings and some antennas.

“You better be careful here,” Nuggie said, glaring at Lemon. “There’s no air. You don’t want to get exhausted.”

Lemon dismissed Nuggie with a curt laugh that disallowed further response. “I’ve been sitting on a couch, looking out a picture window,” she said. “I’m no more exhausted than you are.”

“We’re hours from nowhere,” he said. “At 14,000 if you had to actually do anything...”

“I’m not giving birth today,” said Lemon.

Nuggie muttered, “How do you know?”

Lemon cut him off. “And neither are you. So shut up and get your coat.”

They pulled on their jackets and walked through the thin air to the

restaurant. Nuggie tried to help Lemon across the parking lot but she shrugged him off. All three were gasping by the time they climbed the stairs to the door.

It was hot and noisy inside, but they found a table and ordered cocoa.

“Feels like winter,” said Gam. Nuggie nodded.

Over their drinks Gam suggested exploring the summit and the tiny science station, but Nuggie grumbled about having to remain near Lemon, to which she slammed down her cocoa cup and stalked off to the restroom.

They spent the midday hours consuming hamburgers and fries while gazing wordlessly through the tall picture windows. The skies were partly veiled by swirling wisps of mist, and Gam became fascinated by the slow disappearances and reveals of the distant peaks. At 2:00 PM, Lemon doubled over and let out a groan.

“What the fuck?” said Nuggie.

“It’s nothing,” said Lemon. “Just a contraction.”

“Just?” said Gam.

“I get them all the time now. I told you guys already. I’m not having a baby right now.”

“What the fuck!” said Nuggie.

Gam said, “Doesn’t that mean you’re starting delivery?”

“No, it doesn’t. Mind your own business,” Lemon said.

Nuggie was standing, putting on his jacket. “Time to go,” he said.

Lemon didn’t argue, but she maintained her look of disgust. “You guys don’t know shit,” she said, rubbing chapstick on her lips with short choppy motions. Gam wondered what she would look like if it had been lipstick. Red all over her mouth, like a clown.

In the parking lot, a few low-hanging clouds had appeared out of nowhere and a light snow had begun to drift down. The chilly air had turned seriously cold. But as they began the long drive back down, the clouds around the peak disappeared, and just below 14,000 feet it was no longer winter again.

Nuggie kept looking over at Lemon, but she was staring out the window silently, giving no indication of further discomfort.

Gam poked his head over the front seat and said, “Lem, how long have you been having contractions?”

She turned and glared at him. “They’re in front. Irregular. My water hasn’t broken. If you must know. Jesus!”

“Hey, I’m only trying to help,” Gam said.

“There’s no fucking way *you* can help,” she said. “Or anybody.” She glared at Nuggie, who was now fully engaged in keeping Jesus on the twisting pavement. “Specially him.”

“Well, it’s his baby too,” Gam said, and immediately wished he hadn’t.

“You think so?” Lemon said.

After a minute, Nuggie said, “What the fuck?”

Lemon said nothing.

At the next loopback in the road, there was a wide turn-out and Nuggie abruptly pulled the car off and slammed it into park. “What the fuck are you saying?” he said, gripping the steering wheel and staring out the windshield. An alpine meadow flowed away from the road toward some unseen precipice.

Lemon remained silent. Gam froze, his chin still resting on the back of the front seat.

“You saying that’s not my kid?” Nuggie demanded.

“What the fuck do you think?” Lemon said.

“What the fuck does that mean?” Nuggie said.

“It means this—” she stuck her bloated belly toward him and patted it with both hands, “could be anybody’s. Couldn’t it?”

“Not unless you’ve been—” Nuggie began, and then stopped speaking or moving.

Lemon patted her stomach again. “Hey, hey, hey,” she said.

Nuggie took a breath, and then threw open the car door and jumped outside. Within seconds he was running down across the meadow, away from the car and Clementine and the unborn baby.

Gam was paralyzed. Lemon said, “Well, are you going after him?”

“Shouldn’t I stay with you?” Gam said.

“Not much you can do here,” said Lemon. “He’s the one needs help.”

Gam looked at the line of cars slowly rounding the hairpin by the turnout. Then he shook his head and climbed out and started jogging after Nuggie.

The coarse grass was mixed with gravel and it crunched underfoot. The meadow wasn’t more than a few hundred feet below the peak, and the air

was still so sparse that it passed through Gam's nostrils like it wasn't there at all. Nuggie was no longer running, but continued with a determined stride toward an outcropping of boulders at the meadow's horizon. Beyond was a vast valley, thousands of feet below.

The meadow's gentle curvature steepened as Gam approached the rocks where Nuggie stood, facing the next line of mountains in the front range. Gam called out, "Hey! Nuggie! What are you doing?"

Nuggie immediately climbed a few feet up onto the outcropping as if to escape Gam's advance. When Gam arrived at the edge of the meadow, he was gasping for breath. He turned, and looked back at Jesus, far away, up on the edge of the road. The car was too small to see Lemon inside.

Nuggie was standing now on the outermost ledge, his arms out, gazing into the distance. Gam wondered if he was thinking about leaping off into the valley. Probably not. But Nuggie and Lemon never stopped fighting and their verbal attacks struck deep.

As he began to catch his breath, Gam noticed a faint tension in the air, an unfamiliar rushing feeling from the gathering silence. Then he saw a flash at Nuggie's left wrist. The metal watch band was radiating long blue sparks like a lace cuff.

Nuggie's hair was rising up, standing out in all directions, and faint blue coronas were dancing in the suddenly still air around his head.

Gam's mouth dropped open and he started to call out a warning when, not more than ten or twenty feet away, a towering column of light appeared — a billion volts from mountain to cloud, rearing up from below the edge toward the sky in a trunk of violet and indigo light. For an instant, like a giant tree-trunk five feet in diameter, the lightning bolt was frozen in mid-air. Its outer surface was striated in a deep purple texture like the bark of a pine tree, and the interior glowed lighter and brighter blue towards the center, which blazed as a single, searing white vein of pure electricity.

This immense stroke of light appeared before them outside of time, stretching away above them as they stood paralyzed by its blaze of sheer power. The bolt was so close that they stood inside its shockwave, an engulfing chasm of absolute silence, a clap of inaudible concussion that took their breath away but made not the faintest sound.

Only after the brilliance of the lightning bolt had faded were they

brought back to their senses by a mighty rumbling blast that bounced and echoed back upon them from the neighboring mountainsides.

Nuggie and Gam looked at each other, their hair wild and their coats sprinkled with frost. Nuggie called down to Gam, "Back to the car!" He scrambled off the rocks and they turned and ran, away from the valley, back up across the grassy meadow. After a few paces the sparseness of the air forced them to an exhausted walk. The jog down from the car had taken only a few moments, but rushing back up again became a long and frustrating exertion.

As they hurried in slow motion through the wiry grasses, Nuggie panted, "That was too fucking close."

"No shit. We were almost toast."

"Yeah, toast," Nuggie said.

They plodded on up the hill for minutes, too winded to speak. By the time they climbed onto the road they could only breathe in deep choking gasps. They threw themselves into the car and slammed the doors against the cold wind.

Lemon's voice was small and distant. "Shit," she said.

Nuggie looked at her without speaking.

Lemon went on, eyes down. "Couldn't see you, just the flash. The thunder shook the car." She looked up at Nuggie, "I thought we were alone."

"We?" said Nuggie, and then, "Oh. Yeah."

From the back seat, Gam said, "Can we head on home now?"

Still panting, Nuggie started the Chrysler and pulled out into the slow train of cars descending from the summit and they drove through the dwindling switchbacks without talking. When they reached Echo Lake he turned into the visitors lot and parked.

Nuggie stared out the windshield at the lake for a minute, and said, "We need to talk." Then he got out and went to a picnic table under some trees, leaving Lemon and Gam in the car with the door open. Lemon sat quietly and then grimaced and squirmed in her seat.

"You OK?" asked Gam.

Lemon opened her door and sat for a moment with her legs dangling out. The air was less chilly and the trees allowed only a light breeze to blow through the car. Then she stood, stretched her back, and walked slowly to the picnic table.

Gam closed his eyes, but all he saw was a blue column of light, textured like pine bark. He climbed out of the car, closed all the doors, and leaned against the hood. He looked at Nuggie and Lemon, sitting diagonally across from each other at the picnic table. He didn't want to interrupt, but neither one appeared to be talking.

A few minutes later Nuggie and Lemon got back in the car and Nuggie drove them all out of the park, back onto the highest paved road on the continent.

As the Chrysler hauled its way down the long ridge toward I-70, Gam eyed the precipice on either side of the road. Sitting in the middle of the back seat, he couldn't see the edge of the pavement, just the car doors and distant valleys, with the clear, golden Colorado summer blooming under a deep blue sky.