

THE CRACK

by MIKEL JOLLETT

Margaret and I stared at the General Major for a long time. He'd found the French Navy-issue blazer in Margaret's garage, and it made him look ridiculous. But he liked the oversized shoulders, and besides, we'd all agreed he needed a nickname.

"I don't think it's that deep." He was bent over the hole, balanced on his hands, the cars on Vermont Avenue circling around the orange cone we'd placed in the street. "I can almost see the bottom of it. Take a note, all right? For the minutes."

I removed a pad of paper and a pen from my pocket.

"Huge pothole," he called back to me. "Vermont Avenue. Across from Fatburger. Appears to open into some kind of cavern. Further exploration needed."

Margaret, on the curb, inspected her boots.

"We need some rope if I'm going down there," the General Major said.

"I think Dig has some rope in his garage," I told him. "I could go get it."

"Stop being useful," Margaret said. She wasn't happy about this foray into roadwork.

The General Major shook his head, crouched on all fours. "This thing is spectacular."

Vermont Avenue had become a minefield of potholes after three weeks of rain. This hole, between Sunset and Hollywood, was the largest one. I'd pointed out the crack in the pavement last week, and Margaret, glancing at it, had said "Put it on the docket," if only to ensure that we knew it was her idea.

So this was our mayhem for Thursday. We edged up behind General Major and looked down. "Holy shit," Margaret said, taking a deep breath. She placed a cigarette between her teeth. "How could it possibly get like that? What's holding up the cars?"

At the center, the crack expanded into a large gash. The whole thing looked ten feet long. I crawled up to the lip and stuck my head inside. Beneath the hum of the cars on the street, I could hear water trickling somewhere. It started to rain.

"It must be some kind of sinkhole," Margaret says. She's chewing a small stick, intermittently spitting on the sidewalk and wiping the drizzle from her face while we walk to Dig's place. The city's filled with sinkholes, fallen-in spots where landfill's been dumped on top of swampland to make room for houses. We haven't had a find like this in awhile.

Three months ago, the General Major took us out

to an abandoned neighborhood by the airport. Beneath the flight path of one of the more remote runways, on a hill overlooking Doc Weiler State Beach, a grid of paved streets ran through a neighborhood of empty plots. There were sewer covers, electricity boxes, even a large clearing that we thought might've been a playground—but no houses. We'd hopped the fence to see the ghosts that walked those streets. None of us knew what had happened there. It was as if the neighborhood had simply been forgotten, the way you might forget a phone number, and then vanished.

“Don't tell Dig about the hole,” she says now. “He'll want to come too.”

Margaret isn't awful to look at, once you get past the lumps in her neck and the size and smell of her hair. Dig and I once saw her in a dress. She was sitting in one of those yuppie cafes on Hillhurst across from a man with glasses who kept wiping his face with a napkin. It was weird to see her that way—nervous, trying to look feminine. Margaret is not feminine. She wears cargo pants and combat boots, her rat-nest hair hanging over a tight T-shirt and a checkered flannel. But she must get tired of running around with the General Major and me all the time, smoking pot at Dig's place or reciting sonnets on Shakespeare Bridge over in Silver Lake or whatever it was we did to be someone else for a day and forget that we were all dying.

Margaret likes to think of herself as a realist. At least that's what she said the night I met her. We were sitting in the support group at County Hospital, she with the Book of Mormon in her lap, peeling the cracked skin from her lips, wearing a black T-shirt that

read "I CAN'T... I'M MORMON" (she isn't, she told me later), that lion's mane of hair falling over her shoulders. "I'm going down swinging," she said. "I'm not scared of dying. It's inevitable anyway. You want to know what scares me? *American Idol*."

I had no choice but to fall in love. She sounded so brave, so careless. Even if it was only a front, compared to the other stiffs in the room she was alive and kicking. Kicking. That's how I'd say it.

I'd only recently been diagnosed. I spent three months in a giant black cloud, a blur, a perpetual state of panic filled with long letters and sympathetic stares and sleepless nights and sincere statements from earnest doctors who looked me straight in the eye and said things like "Your urine test showed signs of pathology." "I'm going to send you to a specialist." "You'll need a CAT scan." "Here's my number, call anytime." "You'll probably vomit regularly for a few days after the treatment." And "I'm sorry to say there's still some malignancy."

What do you say? You're twenty-seven and you won't see thirty. It's all so unfair.

And there was Margaret, buying a Big Hunk bar from the vending machine in the lobby after the meeting ended. We were the only people in the group under forty, the only ones without kids, without some sad story about widows-to-be or missing your baby's first steps.

She looked up at me as I walked by. "So what's your deal?"

"Me? Um, pancreas."

"Shit. That's a bad one."

"What about you?"

"Menstrual cramps." She took a bite of the candy

bar. “Oh, and thyroid. That’s where it started, anyway. Now it’s lymph nodes and God knows where else. You know you don’t even really need a thyroid? There are hormones you can take. It takes a while to get the right dosage, but they work. Fucking thing wasn’t even necessary. Thyroid, spleen, prostate—those ungrateful shits are just along for the ride, trying to fuck things up.”

Kicking.

“Well, anyway, pancreas is worse. But I guess you know that.” She hit me on the shoulder. “Buck up, soldier. You’ll get used to it. Just pretend you’re in one of those dreams where you know you’re dreaming and you can do anything you want.” And then she walked out, humming to herself.

Five minutes later I was waiting at the bus stop when she pulled up in a rusted-out silver Honda Prelude. She leaned over and rolled down her window. “You want a ride?” I shrugged, and stood up.

“Nice car,” I said. She threw a pile of clothes into the back seat.

“Yeah. When I first got her I thought I’d have to feed her virgins at midnight, but she runs on actual gas. Where you going?”

“Los Feliz.”

“No shit? Me too. Don’t you ever wonder why they call it that?”

“It means ‘the happy ones’ in Spanish.”

“Yeah, I know, shitbird. But who the fuck is happy in Los Feliz?”

That was it. That was all I needed. We hung out every day. She lived on money that her father sent her, a father she hadn’t seen in ten years. “It’s a guilt fund,”

she said. "He found out I was sick and started sending me checks every month. I wish I'd thought of it before."

When I introduced her to Dig, who had been diagnosed with AIDS long before I got sick, who was not just my best friend but my only one until I met Margaret, she took one look at him and said, "Listen, buddy, if you think we're going to discuss hair products and F. Scott Fitzgerald and shit, you can just forget about it. I'm no fag hag."

"Trust me," he said, eyeing that wayward mass of golden lumpy fur on her head, "you're the last person I'd discuss hair products with."

Dig and Margaret didn't become friends so much as sparring partners. I think they both enjoyed it. Like two boxers trying to stay in shape.

The only people Margaret was ever actually nice to were the desperate-looking strangers we'd meet on the street. The neighborhood was filled with guys like that, and Margaret was always giving them cigarettes. Los Feliz had been the center of old Hollywood—rows upon rows of single-occupancy apartments clustered together like landscaped prison blocks, built for the men and women who came here in the twenties to get into pictures. The actors had since moved west to follow the studios toward Boystown and the Sunset Strip, but the shell remained—all the apartments with their bread doors and high ceilings. Other people—immigrants, hipsters, the homeless—had moved in like hermit crabs. Anyone under twenty was Mexican. If you were twenty-two to thirty-five, you were white and worked for a magazine or a website or a bar. If you were forty to fifty, you were either homeless or you had kids under

twenty, which meant you were Mexican. Anyone over fifty was Armenian and roamed the streets in the afternoon chain-smoking cigarettes and walking small dogs.

We weren't any age or nationality at all. We were the walking dead.

"What do you guys want?" Dig is in his boxer shorts, eating from a jar of peanut butter with a spoon. He's become very thin. Rail thin. The little spurts of hair that jut out of his prepubescent chest look like weeds growing from asphalt. His place is a mess. He ripped the carpet up one day to reveal a hardwood floor covered in nails, and within a week he'd flattened them with a hammer and put down pieces of pink carpet he'd pilfered from a dumpster at Goodwill. He's got a yellow couch and a mannequin in the window. He's got books everywhere, lots of books, and his fireplace mantle is covered in photos he found in the trash, on sidewalks, on the bus. His favorite is framed in sparkling gold Popsicle sticks. It's a faded picture of a Mexican man with a short black mustache staring down at a Ziggy birthday cake. He calls this guy "Jorge."

"We need rope," the General Major says. "We need about thirty to forty feet of rope."

"You can't come," Margaret says.

Dig stirs the peanut butter in the jar, ignoring her. "Rope, eh? Vee have a leettle proj-ect?" He taps the spoon against his temple. No one complains about his accents anymore. "Dah, I have dis, but first, to what purpose shall vee use it?" He walks inside and we follow him, the blades of his shoulders protruding from his

taut skin like they're under a sheet. A very large picture frame hangs on the wall, framing nothing. Next to it is a map of ancient Macedonia, and next to that there's a huge black and white photograph of a urinal.

The rope is in Digger's garage, wrapped around an old paint can, beneath a pile of detritus: wigs, electrical cables, a decaying Parcheesi set. "You're not coming," Margaret says again, right after we close his garage door. We're standing in the rain, wearing garbage bags we took from Dig's kitchen. No one says anything. I listen to the rain fall off the roof. Then Dig laughs, and then I do, and so does the General Major, and then Margaret stops trying not to. We all know that Dig's coming no matter what she says.

Vermont is a river. The rain has become a deluge, a tropical downpour. It's like standing in the shower, only it's cold and we're wading through a winter stream that's running down the right-turn lane of Vermont Avenue as it approaches Hollywood Boulevard. Those Who Are Dry, in their cars, are staring at us. We're acting as if it's the most natural thing in the world to be standing out here. After all, we have our orange cone. Though the garbage bags probably undermine our authority.

Paolo and Francesca walk by. Dig prefers to call them Sid and Nancy. They're both meth addicts, and they usually hang out on our block. Francesca is screaming at Paolo, flashing the few teeth she has left—"Faggot! You fucking faggot! Get the fuck out of here!" Paolo is twenty feet ahead of her, walking away, his face tucked into his trench coat.

“Go ahead, walk! You ain’t ever gonna see me again!” Francesca turns up the street, then stops. “Wait—come back!” She gets up on her toes. “Hold on!” Then, turning: “Oh, you goddamn faggot!”

The hole has grown. It’s not a crack, now; it’s a gaping tear in the pavement. It’s as if some great winged creature has swooped down from the sky and thrashed the street with its claw. Like the street is wounded and the rain is blood, only it’s running into the wound instead of out of it. We can hear it down there, hitting bottom.

Dig grabs the rope and looks around. “Who goes first?” The General Major salutes, clicking his heels together. “Okay, good. Tie it around your waist.”

It’s my job to direct traffic away from the project, which is another way of saying it’s my job to watch out for the cops. Margaret’s doing the same up the street. The General Major double-checks the knot he’s tied and turns toward the hole.

“Wait a minute,” Dig says. “Maybe we should make a harness. I think you’d do better in a harness. I know how to do it.” Dig walks over to him. He unties the square knot around the General Major’s waist and snakes the rope in an arc around his back, then loops an end around each leg, pulling the rope through the small circle he’s left in the front as a cinch. “I don’t think you could survive a fall.”

A look of sincere appreciation comes over the General Major’s face. It’s been a bad week for him. His medication makes him a hemophiliac, and Dig is right; he probably wouldn’t survive a bad fall. That’s probably why he’s here. Dig clasps his shoulder and gives him a shake. “You ready to go down?”

“All set, sir.” The General Major salutes.

Dig runs to the side of the street and ties one end of the rope to a telephone pole. “Just in case,” he says to me with a wink as he passes by. “Okay—begin the descent.”

The General Major looks out over the street, the Jons Market, the Rite Aid, the parking lot, the car wash, the Hollywood sign, the Fatburger, the people in traffic who’ve slowed down to watch. He takes it all in with that raw smile of his, hidden beneath the lines of the beard that hangs from his jaw. He turns around, falls to his hands and knees, and drops himself into the scar.

Trickle. Splatter. The hum of car engines. The chafe of the rope against the pit’s edge as Dig releases it in six-inch increments. Margaret tapping her hands against her pants. The faraway rumble of thunder beneath the beat of the rain. We hold our breath.

A whistle echoes up from the crack. Margaret rushes to the edge. “What? Do you see something? Are you hurt?” I hurry behind her. The General Major is five feet from the top, suspended in air by the rope harness.

“This is fucking cool.” He points the flashlight beneath the street. “It’s huge in here.”

Margaret is dancing on her toes, stepping back and forth like a little girl who has to pee. “What do you see?” she says again.

The General Major looks up. He’s the only one of us who can be anything close to what you might consider “tender” with Margaret. This basically amounts to him spending less time telling her to fuck off than we do. Dig and I suspect it’s because he knows she has a crush on him. I guess we all sort of do. “It’s okay, sweetie,” he says to her.

The General Major has wide eyes, like a child, and a quiet scratchy voice. His interests include everything. I think we all know that in one way or another our excursions are motivated by his boundless curiosity. Margaret, Dig, and I generally go along because we have nothing better to do, because he offers us entertainment and some kind of escape. But the General Major is genuinely excited. When he says he wants to know, in whatever way he can before he dies, where he ends and the world begins, you know he really means it. So then you want to know too.

“Unfuckingbelievable.”

We hear his feet hit the ground with a splash. We can't quite see him, just the beam from the flashlight as it sweeps through the darkness.

I first met the General Major two years ago, on the bus returning from County. Back then his name was Tod. He was sprawled out in the back row with bandages inside his elbows, big heavy bags under his eyes. He looked tired. I couldn't tell how old he was. He could have been eighteen or forty. His skin was like paper, but his face—framed by scraggly black hair and a soft chin—his face never looked sick. His body did. He was reading the graffiti etched into the window of the bus.

“That one's my favorite,” he said. I looked up from my book. He was pointing at a tag in the window. “See how the line of the *T* connects with the *H*? It's like they were trying to invent a new letter. The twenty-seventh letter of the alphabet. *Taitch*.” He scratched his chin, staring at it. “Maybe *Taitch* is the name of their

gang. Westside Taitch, bitches.” He threw up two gang signs with his hands and tapped his chest. “Tell those Shoreline Double-U’s to step the fuck off.”

They’d have spelling bees instead of drive-bys, I said.

“Yeah, or drive-by spelling bees.” He sat up and broke into two voices:

“Yo muthafucka, spell ‘pneumatic’—’

“‘Oh shit, it’s them niggas from Taitch. Um, uh, language of origin please...’

“‘Language of what? Bitch, spell ‘pneumatic!’”

“‘Oh fuck, um, N-E-M... wait, wait, I fucked up. I know this one. Could you use it in a sentence, please?’

“‘A sentence? Bitch, I’m ’bout to kick your pneumatic ass—’

“‘Okay, uh, P-N-E... uh, U-M-A-T-I-C. Pneumatic.’

“‘Oh fuck, he got it. Yo, hit the gas, B, hit the gas—’

“‘That’s right. Represent!’

I yelped as he was full into it. The people at the front of the bus turned around to stare, and the driver eyed us in his visor. The General Major stood up on the seat and yelled “Represent!”

Everything was like this with him.

Margaret didn’t trust him at first. She didn’t trust anybody. “Who’s the stiff?” she’d said when I first brought him over to Dig’s. It was a code we’d developed. We called ourselves stiffs because it was easier to just be out with it, to joke about it, to approach it the same way we approached everything else. As if it was just torturing us with its utter banality. Which was all bullshit, of course. The truth is it scared us to death. But that was usually nights, when we were alone. In the

afternoons, when we were together, we were braver.

“I met him on the bus,” I said. Margaret gave him the once-over to be sure he qualified. All the signs were there.

Dig liked him immediately. That was mostly because the first thing the General Major did was inspect all the shit lying around the apartment. A spi-rograph, a wig head, two Chinese telephones, personal-hygiene posters in Arabic, rubber duckies, the photos on the mantle, a gnome, a vintage gynecologist’s lamp, finger screws, a television covered in green fur, miniature elephants made of tin, a diorama made of dolls’ heads, old board games, action figures, a plastic skull in a biker helmet—the General Major could not have been happier. He spent an hour with Dig looking up words in the *Cyclopedia of Common Things* and saying things like “I think this finger bone must have originally belonged to an orangutan, but it looks like he lost it in a fight over mangoes.” I felt like a talent scout.

A week later, the General Major walked in and said “Let’s go to the Goodwill and dress up like astronauts’ wives having a dinner party.” We were watching *Chinatown* that afternoon, and it was right at that part where the cop looks at Jack Nicholson and says, “Forget it, Jake. It’s Chinatown,” and Margaret was yelling at the TV set, exasperated—“What the fuck does that even *mean*? What the fuck is in Chinatown but a bunch of sidewalk merchants selling tourist shit and dim sum?”—when the General Major said it. She was about to do her Nicholson impression and the General Major had just stepped all over her line.

“What?” She threw him the first of what would eventually become many who-the-fuck-are-you? glances.

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

But the General Major just kept up with it. “They’ve got tons of polyester. Seriously, we can call each other ‘Midge’ and ‘Esther’ and talk about what to do when Frank and Joe come back from the moon.”

Twenty minutes later Dig and I were cruising the CD/silverware aisle of Goodwill in one-piece brown polyester pantsuits. We’d found a matching set. Dig’s fit him just fine, but mine was too small—it made me look more like a Mexican wrestler than an astronaut’s wife. The General Major had found a blonde wig and three highball glasses; he was wearing a green pencil skirt and a bright pink blouse. He walked behind us, commenting on the cutlery—“Well, this set Buzz’s dad and mom got us after that first mission, the one where Rocket Two malfunctioned and the pod landed on Russian soil. My, but wasn’t that a heart attack? Oh, and that Penny Myers, Miss So-and-So. You know I don’t like to speak disparagingly of others in their absence, but she said that the Russians would keep Buzz and Chip for *tests* and *interrogation*. You remember when they found her in the control room in a compromising position with Mister Jim Peters? Ladies, I’ll tell you, that girl is a quick trick or I don’t know bridge.”

Margaret wouldn’t wear a dress; we’d tried to convince her, and she’d ended up sulking over the errant stack of paperback books in the corner. Eventually the General Major went over and said “Don’t worry, sweetie, you can be the man” and gave her a peck on the cheek. Dig and I braced for an explosion. No one ever kissed Margaret. But Margaret just shook him off, and—I wouldn’t believe it if I hadn’t seen it with my

own eyes—*blushed*. The General Major skipped away in his skirt, humming to himself.

After that, we followed his suggestions almost daily. We went to the pigeon races to watch the Armenians scream at the birds while we placed dollar bets on the counter and threatened each other with tongue clucks. We went to the Scientology Center to falsify the stress test they give you to find out what's wrong with you and how Scientology can cure it. Dig and I were pedophiles and Margaret was a crack whore. The General Major was a Republican.

I don't know when he ever actually told us about his sickness. We really didn't talk about it much. He had cardiomyopathy. An enlarged heart. He would disappear for weeks at a time, only to return ten pounds lighter, with zombie eyes and a frog voice. Once, when he'd been gone for a month, when we'd called and called and were certain he was dead, he showed up one afternoon and sat down on Dig's couch like nothing had happened. We grabbed him, screaming—Where were you? What happened? Do you feel okay? But the General Major only said things like "Yes, fine. How are you? I love your necklace. So what's on the agenda for today?" We hugged him and he kissed us and for a few minutes the armor vanished and in its place was just this impulse to keep him close. Eventually Margaret said "Jesus Christ, Tod, fucking call somebody," but he just looked at her with a pixie grin and pinched her cheek.

He told me later that in the hospital, after he'd woken up feeling particularly weak, his heart pumping blood at only thirty percent, it had stopped altogether while they were moving him to the emergency

room. His body had gone into organ failure. He had, for all intents and purposes, died, at least for a few minutes. "Is there is a light? Are there angels? A tunnel? Anything?" I'd asked him. He shook his head. "Nothing. There's nothing. It's a dumb blur."

After that, after the General Major's Heart-Stopping Episode, the whole thing—the club of four, the Unduly Belabored, the quest to live life like a dream, the meetings, the minutes, the agendas—became official. We were out to see everything, to touch everything, to be anything we could within the limits set by Margaret's piece-of-shit Honda. We'd work around doctors' appointments and drug regimens, piling in with her to eat injera bread in Little Ethiopia or sit in on a Santeria exorcism with the Salvadorans in Monterey Park, visiting the Museum of Jurassic Technology to check out the new exhibit on miniaturized mobile homes, walking the old fire roads in canyon country up to passes where the foothills met the desert under fifty-foot electric towers, our coats blown open by sudden gusts of wind.

All along there was the morbid reality of cancer and AIDS and failing organs and poor me and why me? and why her? and why this? and the images we all kept locked in our heads, the funerals, the hospitals, the sobbing parents. The desperate, cloying way in which we secretly wanted, God, another heart, another pancreas, another chance to make different choices, more friends, less loneliness, new drugs, more energy, more time. You sit around with these thoughts and you cry so hard, you wrench and shake and sputter and lie awake trying to think of romantic things for someone to read over your grave—but it's all so awful and selfish. You get tired of it.

* * *

The rain is deafening. Like standing under a waterfall. Thick streamlets cascade off the roof of the Washington Mutual. The turn-lane river flowing down the hill from Griffith Park has become a turbulent rush of brown water, empty cans, cigarette butts. We watch a hubcap and two shoes float by. We expect, at any moment, to see baby Moses. On the opposite side of the street a large puddle has become a small lake. Cars are trying to cross it as they turn right onto Sunset, but the water nearly reaches their bumpers. They circle in large arcs, way out into the middle of the intersection. The storm feels like a dare. Like someone has lost a bet. "Maybe it'll just fucking *rain*," Margaret says, her garbage bag pulled over her head. "Like, from now on."

Dig has gone for reinforcements: cigarettes, another flashlight, some food. "I'm so over this," Margaret says, impatiently fidgeting with her fingernails. "I don't remember it ever being this bad." Which is true. It's the worst rain, everyone says, Los Angeles has ever seen. Which means it's the most rain in about fifty years. Tonight mudslides and collapsed houses will crowd the evening news. A giant boulder sits perched in the middle of Pacific Coast Highway. Nine people have already died in an avalanche of mud so thick it'll take work crews three days to dig the bodies out. The beach is run-over with waste from the storm drains. The L.A. river is a river again, instead of a place to race cars and shoot heroin. The Sepulveda Basin is flooded. Shelters are crowded. Two dogs have drowned. Traffic is stopped. The city is under siege.

Paolo is sitting on a bus bench across the street with his hands tucked into his pockets. Francesca appears. "What the fuck are you doing here? I said *go*, you fucking faggot." Paolo shrugs as she approaches, then stands and walks away. "Wait," she says.

Dig returns, and Margaret says she'll go down next. She refuses to let Dig help her—"You'd drop me anyway, you dick," she says. "I'll just climb." She walks up to the edge of the crack and yells down to the General Major, "I'll be there in a minute. Hold the rope for me."

"Okay, sweetie," he yells back. "I got it."

Sitting with her feet inside, she wraps her legs around the rope and twists her body onto it. We watch her grunt and heave and inch her way down. She's singing to herself, off-key. Bruce Springsteen, it sounds like. All we can see is her wet head. When she lands, Dig offers me an after-you gesture. I'm next.

The rope is wet. I am cold. We decide I'm not strong enough to climb down, so Dig uses the lamp pole as a pulley, hooking the rope around it to lower me. I weigh more than the General Major. Most people do. The hole looks impossibly big beneath my soaked shoes. "Ready," I tell him.

It's warmer inside the cave. Just beneath the pavement, the walls are made of crumbling dirt. It smells like wet asphalt, then wet soil, then wet clay. A steady stream of water falls over my face and hands. I hear a truck clamor by.

They grab my feet as I near the bottom to steady the swing of the rope. Then they grab my legs and chest. Then I'm standing on the bottom, hugging the General Major. "Look," he says, a toothy grin overcoming his

face. "Over there." And points the beam of light into the corner.

At the end of the beam is a tunnel. It's about five feet tall, four feet wide. Dig's on the rope now, lightning in the sky outside. When he lands, a six-inch chunk of pavement falls in behind him, missing his head by a hair. It hits the ground with a heavy splash and he jumps. I can hear the screech of tires and the sound of metal hitting metal above us.

We huddle together at the edge of the cave, where it's safer, our hands on our knees and cigarettes in our teeth. The General Major points Dig's head in the direction of the tunnel. Dig laughs to himself, studying the contours of the opening. "Oh yeah, definitely," he says.

We all stare at the General Major for cues. "There are a few schools of thought regarding cave exploration," he says. "The first thing to remember is that we may have a limited amount of battery power, so we should conserve. It's also important to note that the buddy system is an important tool for survival—practiced, in fact, by the Tongva Indians who inhabited this very land..." I look from face to face while the General Major speaks. Dig's staring at the ground.

"...The Tongvans and the Chumash hunted small game on what is now Santa Monica Boulevard. They were the only seafaring Native American tribes. Living on a diet of fish and local shrubs, they wove intricate baskets from straw and practiced elaborate ceremonies for the burial of their dead. This may be their cave..."

Margaret looks scared. There are tiny drops of rain

on the ends of her eyelashes. I can feel her breath on my cheek.

“...Which brings me to oxygen...”

The General Major is swaying back and forth, caught up in the histrionics of his speech.

“...but what we really need is headlamps, and more rope. Or some shovels. Or some dynamite. Or a canary.”

My hands are white and prunish. Fingernails dirty. Shoes covered in mud. The ever-present knot at the pit of my stomach has come temporarily untied. I feel light and giddy and scared and awake. It's a good speech, but this is one instance in which none of us need any motivation. We all know we're going down the tunnel.

There is an awful lot of dirt beneath the ground. We shuffle through it awkwardly, our heads down, our shoulders hunched over. The ceiling's barely five feet high. I stare at the heels of Margaret's boots, following her footsteps. It smells like a garden. It feels like a womb, or a grave.

I look up when Margaret's steps stop in the dirt in front of me. Dig has halted the procession, the shadow of his messy head cocked sideways, his ear pressed forward.

“Listen.”

The General Major stumbles forward and rests his chin on Dig's shoulder. The muffled white noise of the street above, the cars, the wayward air, the static, gives way to a pattern. I feel like I'm lying silently in a tent, listening for movement in the bushes. The movement of large things has an unmistakable quality, no matter how faint the sound. After a few seconds, it becomes

clear: we are on the edge of something vast.

The sound grows louder as the path angles downward. Every fifty feet, the tunnel makes a sharp turn, left then right then left again. We hold to the side to steady ourselves on the steep decline. Margaret's hair silhouetted against Dig's flashlight takes on a ghost-like quality. She turns to me every minute or so as if to say something, then places a hand over her mouth and turns around again.

Dig and the General Major have upped the pace; Margaret and I are ten feet behind. The air grows tighter, heavier. She stops, bracing herself against the sides of the tunnel as if to wedge her body in place. I stop behind her.

"That's it. That's it."

"What's it?"

Her voice is different, barked out in a fierce whisper. "I'm not going any further."

She's panting, biting down on her lower lip. Dig and the General Major disappear around the bend ahead of us. It's pitch black.

I place my hand on her shoulder and feel it tense. A quiver of fear rises up my spine. I whisper "C'mon, Margy," like I'm talking to a spooked horse.

"I'm... not... going... any... further." The words sound like nails in wood. I hear her fingernails scratching at the dirt. There's something feral about it. Part panic, part threat.

A cry comes up the path. A whoop. It's Dig's voice: "Ho-lee shit!"

The General Major's voice comes next. "Oh my God. Oh my God." A flash of light swings back around

the bend ahead. "You have to see this." They turn the corner toward us, Dig's eyes wide, his jaw dropped.

It's the General Major who notices Margaret. He points his flashlight at her face for an instant, then moves it away. In that second, we all see her braced in the tunnel, her shoulders heaving, her white face. "What is it, honey?" he says. Margaret looks up as if in a trance, her eyes pointed straight ahead.

"This was really stupid."

The General Major eases next to her, placing his hand over hers in the dirt. He looks around at Dig and me and then whispers to her, stroking her fingers. "It's okay," he says. Dig sighs. The General Major shushes him.

"I don't like this. I don't want this. I don't want to see anything. I want to go back."

Dig starts to walk away, and the General Major nods me in his direction. I stand and follow the flicker of light down the path. The sound becomes deafening.

The first thought I have when I see the cavern is about light and rock. About the way in which something that seems flat can be filled with thousands of angular contours. The second thought is more basic. It's a matter of regaining bearings, more of the *HOLY SHIT* variety.

We're at least two hundred feet below Hollywood Boulevard, standing on a cliff, forty feet above an underground river. The water's a hundred feet across. The cavern's the size of a small football stadium. Dig puts his hand on my back and points the light at the ceiling, solid rock a hundred feet above us. Then he sweeps the beam down in an arc, following the slope to where

it ends at the water. He shows me the opening at the edge of the cavern where the river boils up from underground. It's difficult to take in all at once.

"It would be water," he says. "You just had to know it was something like this."

I'm not ready to be clever with him yet. Dig is always like that. We could be staring at a spaceship and he'd act like he knew it was there all along.

"I think it's an aquifer," he says. "This is probably all melted ice flowing out to sea."

"Ice? There's ice around here?"

"Snow. From the mountains, from Big Bear." He stretches his arms over his head as if he's about to take a dive. "It has to go somewhere."

I try to think of something to say. It's all running through my head at once.

"Do you think this was always here? Do you think maybe those people, the Tongvans or whatever, knew about it, that they came down here, that they stood exactly where we're standing now and it looked exactly like this?"

"I don't know, man. Maybe a dam broke or something." Dig tosses a rock off the cliff. We watch it fall through the cavern and disappear.

The General Major appears behind us. He has his arm around Margaret, the military stitch of his navy jacket tucked under her chin. "Maybe all this water is going somewhere," he says. "Maybe we're going there too."

Margaret wrestles free of his grip. "You guys are so full of shit. Do you have any idea how many ways there are to die down here? What if the tunnel caves in? What if somebody cuts the rope? What if we can't get out and we're stuck?" She backs up. "What about that?"

“Margy,” Dig says. “Calm down. Everything’s fine. Nothing’s going to happen. Look at this.” He extends his arms in a sweeping motion over the river. “Did you ever think you would see something like this?”

“Everything is not fine!” she screams. Dig, the General Major, and I exchange glances. She’s panting again, running her hands up and down the side of her shirt. “What if we’re just going to be fucking stuck here!? What if there’s nothing we can do about it and we’re just going to die!?” She runs her fingers frantically over her head, pacing. We all watch as a tuft of hair comes out in her hand. We freeze.

She looks down at the ball of matted, lifeless, golden locks in her palm. Her lip begins to tremble. “You fucking assholes! Fuck you! Fuck all of you! Fuck this!”

“Margy, honey, relax!” the General Major says. She backs up against the wall and stumbles over a stone. Dig catches her. Her arms flail madly, hitting him in the face. The General Major tries to grab her hands and she scratches him hard on the cheek. I reach blindly for her waist, to restrain her, to calm her, to keep her from hurting herself, and a heavy knee hits the bottom of my chin. It feels like a two-by-four, the impact vibrating up my jaw, and my body snaps backward over the embankment. There’s nothing to hold onto, nothing to grab—I’m rolling over dirt, my vision flipping, and then my leg’s in the water.

The noise gives way. I’m standing somewhere in the center of my skull, like my entire life, the entire world, has been compounded to a single point. I feel an intense longing for something. I picture Francesca’s face, like I’m watching her from behind a screen: toothless, penniless,

hopeless, sad, screaming and whimpering, telling Paolo to leave, to stay, to let go, to hold on, swinging her bag and crying. “You faggot. You goddamned faggot—”

A hand taps my face and I hear a voice. Dig’s asking me if I’m okay. “Hey man. Hey.” I don’t want to leave the tiny dot. I like being three millimeters tall. I feel safe in my skull. “You okay? Hey.” I pretend to be unconscious, imagining the two meth addicts chasing each other for eternity in hell. I am a singularity, I am a drop of water, I am a boy trapped at the bottom of a well.

Margaret’s coming down the slope with the General Major, crying hysterically. “Is he all right? I didn’t mean to do it. Is he breathing? Tell him I didn’t mean to do it!” She falls onto me and crowds my face, rubbing her cheek against mine. “I didn’t mean it. Oh, God. Tell me you’re okay. Are you bleeding?”

I open my eyes and look up at her. “I’m fine,” I lie.

Her face is wet with tears. She just keeps saying “I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry—”

The General Major walks up and has the bright idea to take my foot out of the river. And then, as if to remind me that there are certain people in life you cannot take for granted, even for moment, he says: “Well, I’d say you’re gonna live, but we all know that isn’t true.”

“People find out you’re sick and they tell you all these romantic things.” We’re sitting with our backs against the incline, a flashlight wedged into the dirt illuminating the enormous ceiling above us, eating the sandwiches that Dig bought at the Shell station. Margaret has calmed down, though she’s still sniffing as she speaks.

“You know, ‘I’ll always be there for you.’ ‘I’ll walk the earth for you.’ Whatever. But then you need a ride home from work or someone to talk to on a Tuesday night and they’re too busy, too preoccupied with, I don’t know, bullshit... I don’t want anyone to walk the earth for me.” She pauses. “Not unless I can come too.” It’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard her say, though odd, for someone who once admitted that her biggest fear was that when she died her mother might find her vibrator.

I take her hand and lean in sideways under her chin. Her hair looks like fluffy blonde clouds.

“I promise I’ll always pick you up from work when you need a ride,” I say.

“You don’t have a car.”

“I’ll loan you bus fare.”

“You’re broke.” She looks down, rubbing my chin softly, then leans in and kisses me full on the lips.

Trickle. Splatter. The movement of water.

“I love you,” she says, to no one in particular. The words echo off the walls of the cavern, following the aquifer, tracing the lines of the jagged granite. They fall over us like a blanket. She is the warm center of the room, emanating outward in golden waves. I want to climb into her lap.

We huddle close, Dig, the General Major, and I, leaning against Margaret. I nestle against her side and feel her hand on my forehead, counting the seconds, trying to remember: here, now, this.

The light from the flashlight goes out. Black water rushes beneath the city.