

BOULDER AND BACK

Tom Gartner

When Rob and I left northern California, we were as happy together as we'd ever been. We'd had our share of storms and troubles, but getting fired together can be quite the bonding experience. Here's the short version: when we got together, he was the manager at a restaurant in the Napa Valley, and I was a waitress. I missed two shifts in a row without calling in, and the owner, Lou, quite rightly told Rob to fire me. Rob wouldn't do it, so Lou fired both of us.

That was our pattern. I would try not to break any rules, and when I inevitably failed, Rob would have my back.

"This is quite an experiment for me," I told him on our first day at the unemployment office.

"What—looking for work?"

"No. Being with a man who doesn't put himself first."

“OK.” He didn’t seem sure it was a compliment. “And how’s the experiment going?”

“It’s strange,” I said. “Almost unnatural, really. But on balance, I like it.”

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Rob and I had been a good team at the Golden Bear. He dealt with the scheduling, the infrastructure, the ordering, all those things that straight-arrow people are good at. I, on the other hand, as a hyperactive and sharp-tongued diva, was well equipped to play border collie to our misfit crew. Bitter intellectuals, dissipated college kids, and illegals from Latin America, Hong Kong, Haiti—I made sure they knew that the customers were the priority, not their own convenience or egos. Unfortunately, the one person who could not be convinced of this was Lou, the ruler of our little world.

Working in a restaurant can be a good gig, or it can be miserable wage slavery. Lou did his best to ensure the latter outcome. It was no great leap for Rob and me to think that if we had our own place, we could get out of paycheck-to-paycheck mode and do business with the humanity and flair Lou so utterly lacked.

And why Colorado? This was the early nineties, the brewpub thing was still new, and someone had told Rob that Boulder was ripe for one. So, to be

fair, it was his plan. But we'd talked about it so much—on cigarette breaks at work, over beers afterwards, eventually in bed on our rare quiet mornings—and he'd agreed with so many of my suggestions (a stage for live music? Split-level seating, with the bar up high, the dining room below? Brewing vats behind floor-to-ceiling plexi? All approved)—that I'd come to think of it as mine too. I hesitate to call it a dream, because how much is that to ask out of life? But whatever it was, we aimed to chase it.

“It's going to be a jolt, for sure, M,” Rob said to me on our last night in California. We were on the beach at Jenner, where the Russian River runs into the Pacific. “Leaving a lot of people behind.” But in fact, we weren't close to our families, and in some ways, I hoped it would be easier to have some miles in between.

“No more ocean sunsets,” I said. Since I'd met Rob, we must have watched the sun go down from every beach between San Francisco and Mendocino. We were always hoping to see the elusive Green Flash that supposedly can happen with ocean sunsets. At least Rob was, and being a dutiful girlfriend (sometimes) I took on the duty.

“Well, if it doesn't work out in Boulder, we can always come back.” He put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed gently. “People drink beer here too.”

So we went. Rob rented a U-haul trailer that his aged Civic was just barely able to haul over Donner Pass and across the desert. Anything that wouldn't fit in the trailer or the car, we sold or gave away—books, old clothes, furniture, even some of my CDs and two of his four bikes. He didn't whine about it, but I know that hurt him.

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What can I say about Boulder? Someone had told Rob that it was like Berkeley, but with mountains. For him, trusting soul that he was in those days, that was enough, because Rob loved mountains. As for me, I wasn't a trusting soul, but I wasn't always a smart one either.

The clincher to the decision was that Rob's friend Wade was in Denver. Wade, so Rob told me, was the perfect partner to get the brewpub off the ground. He'd been the manager of the café in Mendocino where Rob got his first job, and he'd been working in the business off and on ever since. More importantly, he had money, or at least his father, who lived in southern California, had money. And Wade had been in Colorado for three years, so he knew the area and he had useful contacts—realtors, bankers, wholesalers, publicists.

So those were our reasons for needing him. His reason for needing us was that he had a small to medium felony conviction on his record (drug trafficking—marijuana and hashish), and so he needed an officially clean business partner. Rob and I were no paragons, but we'd at least managed to avoid getting arrested.

"He's not still dealing, is he?" I asked Rob when we discussed the move. "Because that would be a whole different proposition."

"Absolutely not," Rob said. "He learned his lesson. He was so much younger then—it's like it happened in a different universe. You'll see."

And in fact, Wade seemed like a sweet guy. I'm sure he'd heard some horrifying stories about me, thanks to the various glitches in my relationship with Rob, but he treated me like a long-lost sister. He opened doors for me, never let me pay for a drink, asked me intelligent questions and listened to my answers.

That was all very agreeable, but I already had a long-lost brother. Two of them, actually—*hard-partying fuck-ups who thought it was only natural to pull their little sister into their demented circle of friends*. I love them, I would have to say, in spite of all the trouble and heartbreak they've steered me into. But I know better than to trust them, and that held for Wade, too.

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Boulder was not Berkeley, and I liked that about it. Less scruffy, less self-righteous, just a place where people did what they wanted to and left other people alone. We got jobs easily enough—Rob at a sports bar, me at a French restaurant—and crammed ourselves into a coffin-shaped studio apartment with a fragmentary view of the Flatirons.

We had a lot of work in front of us if the brewpub was going to happen. If that was intimidating, it was exciting too. We had to save money, so that meant fewer meals out, fewer shows, fewer drinks that didn't come from the corner liquor store. We spent our time off parked in the apartment, coffee brewing, sound system cranked, leftover pizza sitting out on the coffee table... Rob filled yellow legal pads with notes about SBA loans, HR laws, building codes. I concocted menus, dreamt up wacky beer names, drew floor plans, talked on the phone to people in brewpubs that actually existed. Every so often a piece would fall into place and one of us would cross the room for a kiss.

The mountains were nice enough to look at, if you like that sort of thing. But Rob liked it a little too much. He kept stealing off in his lycra, alone or with Wade, doing his best to get himself killed. If it wasn't climbing, it was cycling. Rob's two bikes hung from the ceiling of the apartment like carbon

fiber vampires. He and Wade claimed that the outdoor fun was hooking them up with a demographic that would be our core clientele.

“I certainly can’t argue that your new pals aren’t prodigious drinkers,” I told Rob. “But I’m pretty sure you’re hanging out with them because you want to, not because you need to.”

He could only smile and look away.

Of course, I had my own version of play masquerading as work. To me, the best thing about the brewpub idea was the live music, so naturally I checked out some of the local bands. I had a useful accomplice in Erica, our tall blonde neighbor. She’d slept with several of the better rockers in town, so she was able to get us comped to shows, and she was more than happy to introduce me around. She probably thought I was looking to replace Rob, which I wasn’t, but it meant I could trust her to be discreet. There was some flirting that had to be done, some stray hands that had to be tolerated, some illegal substances that had to be consumed. Musicians are what they are.

Even with the distractions, we were making progress. Wade, just as advertised, did know the business. Start-up money, of course, was the big issue. Between us all, Rob and I (mostly Rob) had about \$10,000, Wade twice that. We’d applied for a \$50,000 loan from the SBA, and we were hoping for a

\$75,000 investment from Aaron, Wade's father. He came to Boulder after we'd been there a month.

Wade had for some reason insisted that the meeting should take the form of a hike up Forsythe Canyon in the mountains west of town, and Aaron was already there when Rob and I got to the trailhead. He was tall, slightly balding, but with that glossy, *soigné* look that rich guys often have.

Rob introduced us as though words cost money—"Aaron, Monica; Monica, Aaron," and then asked him, "No Wade yet?"

"What else is new?" Aaron shrugged and smiled at me—blindingly white teeth.

We made small talk for a few minutes. Rob and Aaron hadn't seen each other in years, so they had a lot of catching up to do. For one thing, Wade had apparently not informed Aaron of my existence, much less my role in the business.

"Don't know why he'd keep you a secret," Aaron said. "You seem like you might be the brains of the whole outfit." Another one of those smiles. "But Wade never tells me the important stuff."

Once Wade got there, we strolled along the stream, Rob doing most of the pitch, Wade just staring into the water. Aaron nodded pleasantly at Rob's descriptions of our plans: the feasibility study, the layout, the décor, the menus, the brewery. Rob had brought a binder with all our documentation in it, but other than a few of my sketches and some photos we'd taken of locations we liked, Aaron didn't seem to want to look at any of it. Was he dyslexic? I wondered. Maybe he didn't really know that much about the business? I pushed Wade a few yards up the trail and hissed "What's going on?" at him, but he just sighed and shook his head.

Then Aaron started asking questions, casually at first— What were we thinking for the square footage? Business hours? Were we going to have live music?—and then in more and more detail, quizzing us about the intricacies of liquor licenses, building codes, kitchen equipment, produce markets, labor laws, bookkeeping, guacamole recipes...

Some of the answers were mine to make—no problems. But mostly it was Rob's show. I was surprised at the breadth of his knowledge, and he was deft at admitting ignorance without sounding like a dumbshit. A few of the queries bounced to Wade, who answered them in terse, choppy phrases, making no eye contact with anyone.

Aaron knew his shit, clearly, and he was intent on finding out if we knew ours. I thought we were doing well enough, Wade's crankiness notwithstanding. We walked up the trail to a little waterfall, took a break there, and headed back.

"One thing I'm still wondering about..." Aaron paused, as if it had just occurred to him "...is the brewing part. You have some ideas about what you need space-wise and equipment-wise, and you've got a concept. But sooner rather than later you need to find a brewmaster and figure out what you can really do."

"Working on it," Wade said. "We've got a guy in mind. We just need to convince him to move."

"If you're sure he's the right guy." A question, really—are you going to tell me more?

"He works at Coast Range Brewing in Ukiah." Wade seemed unhappy about having to say this, but after a moment he went on. "He's the assistant to the brewmaster. Been doing it for five years."

"Ukiah..." Aaron gave the place name an odd twist. "Would this by any chance be our old friend Zach?"

"That's right."

“Zach the schizo? Zach the heroin addict?”

Wade stared at Aaron. “It’s not like we haven’t all had our issues. You included.”

“Yeah, no doubt—“

“It’s not like a half-million-dollar house disappeared up his nose,” Wade said.

“True.” Aaron forced a smile. “But don’t you think it would have if he’d had one?”

Not for the first time, I wished I’d paid more attention to Rob’s stories about Wade, about the restaurant in Mendocino, about the drug bust and the aftermath. I knew that Aaron had owned the restaurant, that Wade had dealt drugs out of it, that Rob and Zach had worked there and been involved too, that only Wade and his then girlfriend had been arrested, though somehow Zach had ended up in the hospital. But... schizo... heroin addict? Rob had just told me that Zach was a hell-raiser who’d straightened out, had this brewpub gig, was living with a woman and raising their daughter.

Which saccharine bio he now repeated for Aaron.

Aaron pondered the ground. “O.K., Rob, I trust your judgment. Just bear in mind it’s business, it’s not about old pals. Right, Monica?”

That was startling, Aaron talking to me as though I were the sensible one. Not a quality I often get credit for—but then, he didn't know me. "Definitely," I said, and made a wild stab at diplomacy, "These guys know that."

"Maybe I'll pay Zach a visit when I get back to California," Aaron said. Wade and Rob looked like they'd been slapped, but how could they object?

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Aaron went back to his hotel. The rest of us debriefed over margaritas at a Mexican restaurant.

Wade was not happy. "We should have taken him climbing. One little *oops* and all our troubles are over."

"Only you're not sure what's in his will," Rob said, straight-faced. "No, look, I think it went well. Even the part about Zach."

"Seriously?" Wade chuckled.

"Well, considering. Monica?" Evidently Rob could hear my foot tapping under the table.

"You guys really should have told me about that," I said.

"My fault," Rob said instantly. "Totally my fault. But look, M, he was in the hospital for two months, he had five surgeries and a year of rehab. That's

how he got addicted. And he's been clean for five, six years. I guarantee you it's not an issue."

"It sure sounds like it's an issue for Aaron."

"The hell with Aaron," Wade said.

"Come on, Wade. You know I get it—" Rob was barely on speaking terms with his own father. He'd left home when he was seventeen. "But if we want him to let bygones be bygones about Zach, it's got to run both ways."

"I'm just telling you..." Wade swept some stray crumbs of salt off the table. "It's going to be this way. He can't help interfering. Maybe we should do this without him."

"He wasn't in the original plan, it's true. I don't know." Rob glanced at me, and I was pretty sure where he wanted me to come down. Well, I'm used to being the one who speaks up.

"75k is 75k," I said, giving Wade a cold stare. "So deal with it."

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We decided it was better to have Aaron meet Zach on our home turf. Aaron was on his way to the East Coast for a couple of weeks, and we got him to agree to make another quick stopover in Denver on the way back. We'd meet him for lunch at the airport, Zach in tow, and then he'd fly on to California.

The strange thing, though, was that once we'd arranged the meeting, Rob seemed to lose his momentum for the brewpub. Early morning rock climbs in the Flatirons, night-time mountain bike rides, endless weekend hikes to the summits of fourteeners—it was almost like he and Wade were afraid of being indoors.

Of course, I was not sitting home alone. Erica and I shopped, though at Boulder prices we mostly couldn't afford the things we wanted, and we clubbed and we went to parties. Sometimes in the evenings we'd meet up with Rob and Wade at a sidewalk café on the Pearl Street mall, and those memories had a special flavor for me: margaritas, live jazz, fading mountain light. But when Zach arrived, that all ended, because Erica hated him, and anyway Rob and Wade were too busy showing him all their favorite trails, glaciers, and rock faces.

Zach, though he still wasn't committing to taking the gig, had been more than happy to fly out for the weekend. I got the impression that he was finding family life a bit confining. He was a weird, ugly guy, with long stringy hair and a flattened nose, given to quoting German philosophers and spouting conspiracy theories. I liked him, but he had an alarming tendency to think he knew what was best for you.

So, the meeting at the airport: Aaron's flight was due at 7:00 p.m., with a two-hour layover. The Unholy Trinity (a nickname I'd given them half in jest, half in anger) figured this left them plenty of time to drive into the Front Range, scramble up some pile of rocks, and meet me at the arrival gate to mob Aaron when he deplaned.

But when the time came, I was the only one there. That the Trinity had tumbled to their deaths was a possibility, of course, but one I'd learned not to take seriously. Far more likely that they'd stopped off for a celebratory drink.

Aaron, when he arrived, wearily took the same view. "Not to worry." We settled into a shadowy booth at a Tex-Mex bar and grill joint. "From what I hear, Rob's a really safe climber, and Wade's scared to lead anything hard."

Not to worry—sure. Not to be so pissed off I could scream—much harder. But I had to maintain, to stall and pretend things were fine. All the while I felt our 75k slipping away.

Aaron was polite enough about it. "I think you and Rob are great," he said. "You'll make a go of something somehow."

But maybe not this? I thought, and then, being me, said out loud.

Aaron shrugged. "If you were out in the Northwest, I've got a project going that you'd be perfect for. Newport—you know the Oregon coast? Good-sized

town. Amazing fishery. I'm in with a couple of local guys on a little seafood café. Right next to the pier. Lots of small plates, sushi, crab cakes, that kind of thing."

"Sounds fun," I said, hoping to draw him out and kill more time.

Not a problem—he could have talked all day about swordfish and sashimi, four-tops and freezers. It was sort of cute that he was so passionate about it. Anyway, it filled the time until finally—finally—Rob got there. Just Rob.

"Car trouble." He was sweaty, dusty, still in his climbing clothes. "Long story, but I had to leave those guys to sort it out. I'm really sorry." He leaned over to kiss me—an admission of sorts, since it let me smell the beer on his breath. At the same time, he squeezed my shoulder in a way that I somehow understood as, 'please don't start yelling at me until Aaron's gone'. As different as Rob and I are, there were times the communication was almost telepathic.

There wasn't much we could say to Aaron. We made some noises about him meeting up with Zach in California, Rob apologized until it was embarrassing, and that was it. Aaron didn't press for a full explanation, but he seemed to know it had something to do with the trouble between Wade and him. It obviously made him sad, which made me sad too, and I impulsively gave him a hug when we said goodbye.

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I didn't actually yell at Rob. It was understood. I just looked at him and waited.

"I'm sorry, M." He looked steadily back at me. "I tried."

More waiting.

"The climb was awesome. I don't think I've ever seen Zach that happy. I thought we were really revving him up to make a good impression on Aaron. You know—he can be funny. Charming, even."

Charming was a stretch, but I knew what he meant.

"We were up and down in plenty of time, so we went for a beer. Then Wade started ordering food. Margaritas. Flaming shots. The waitress was flirting with him and Z. I kept trying to pry them loose, but finally they were so wasted there was no point."

I sighed. It was no use hammering him. Wade, and Zach too, had done a lot for him when he was younger, on his own as a teenager, and he still felt he owed them.

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Once Zach had left town, Wade admitted he just wasn't into the brewpub scheme, with or without Aaron. He'd met a woman, someone he thought he

wanted to marry, and she was his focus. “OK, good for him,” I said when Rob told me that, and I almost meant it. If it took us out of Wade’s orbit, fine.

A day later we got a call from Aaron, telling us he’d decided to back out as well. No surprise, but still, if something cheap and breakable had been close by, I’d have smashed it.

“No worries, Aaron,” I said. “We understand.”

He wished us good luck, I thanked him, and then, without it even forming in my head as a conscious thought, I asked: “How’s it going with the place in Oregon?”

“You know, I was going to wait a couple of days before I said anything.” He paused. Then paused some more.

“And you still are?” I asked.

I looked around at Rob, and he had this odd, alert, not entirely pleased expression on his face, like he knew exactly what was coming next.

And he was right—[Aaron wanted us to manage his restaurant in Newport.](#)

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Rob was torn, he said. It was a good offer. Obviously. But wasn’t the whole idea to have our own place, not to work for someone else?

“It was,” I said. “But where? With what money? It doesn’t seem to be happening. I feel like, if we show Aaron we know what we’re doing, he’ll let us run things. So it’s almost as good. And we’re not risking our own money.”

“Only Wade says he’s not like that. He’s hands-on.”

I snorted. “He lives in L.A. How’s he going to be hands-on from a thousand miles away?” I wondered if Rob’s real hesitation was something completely different—that he just didn’t want to leave the mountains. “And worst case, if it doesn’t work out—it’s a stepping stone, right? With the money he’s offering.”

“I guess.” He sighed. Surrender was imminent. “But you’re not going to be booking any rock bands for a seafood café.”

“We’ll see about that,” I said.

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I admit I may have been imagining Newport as more like Portland or Seattle than it actually turned out to be. The town sprawls along the coast at the mouth of the Yaquina River. Bay Boulevard runs along the riverfront, with piers, warehouses, and fish markets on the water side, restaurants and B&Bs across the street. It’s not exactly the Great White Way, but after dark it’s the only action for twenty miles in any direction.

The restaurant had been closed for a couple of years since the death of its founder. His heirs were a son and a nephew. Neither of them knew anything about running a restaurant, which was where Aaron came in. He was the pro from Dover who was going to resuscitate the place. Rob and I were his stone-cold henchmen.

We were about a month from opening. The construction work was mostly done, and I could see that, as dumpy and worn as most of the town looked, the café was going to be a little gem. Old original brick walls, a zigzag-patterned hardwood floor mixing light and dark woods, floor-to-ceiling windows looking out onto the street and the harbor beyond, a full-wall mural of the Cascades behind the bar, stout little granite-topped tables. In the daytime, sunlight flooded in through the street windows and a couple of big skylights; at night a forest of track lighting kept everything bright.

Even coming in so late in the game, there was plenty for us to do. Hiring, phones, utilities, bank accounts, suppliers, cleaners, garbage and recycling, scheduling, menus. Rob had the experience to deal with all that. Me, not as much, but I did what I could and tried to learn. Hiring was maybe the one area where I was better. I can spot thieves, addicts, and shirkers in a second, whereas Rob always wants to think the best of people.

Two days before our soft opening. Rob had come in at 6 a.m. to train the kitchen staff. I'd gotten there at noon to work with the wait staff. By 8 p.m. it was just the two of us, plus Aaron who'd been at a dinner with the other owners, where he'd clearly done some drinking.

"Get out of here, both of you," I said. Rob was coughing constantly and running a fever. He'd managed to turn a head cold into bronchitis by going on a forty-mile bike ride in the rain.

They both left, and for a few hours I had the place to myself. There was paint to touch up, lights to string, menu copy to proofread, a linen delivery to unpack... At one a.m., I was rearranging tables and chairs for the n th time when Aaron came back.

"Why are you still here?" He was loud, amused, disheveled.

"Why did you come back?" I questioned. "Go home and sleep it off."

"Stuff to do." He veered into the office, sat down at the desk. He spent half an hour shuffling through applications we'd rejected, smoking cigarettes, reading the sports section of the local paper. I ignored him. I was trying to make a wobbly table balance when he came up behind me.

"You want some help with that?"

"It's OK, I got it."

“Monica, I have to tell you, I really appreciate how hard you’re going at all this.”

“Well, of course,” I said. “We’re thrilled with the place.”

He didn’t go away. I turned, smiled at him, started to move around to the other side of the table. He pulled me into a hug. Whatever. He reeked of cologne and booze.

I smiled again, turned away. He stopped me, one hand on my hip, the other on my breast, pulling me towards him.

I spun away. “Aaron, no.” My face felt hot—like I was the one who’d done something incredibly stupid? “No, no, no.”

“Come on, Monica.” He smiled crookedly, an expression I hadn’t seen before. “Let’s not play that game.”

“Let’s not play *any* game,” I said. “Leave me alone.”

If he didn’t understand English, could he not at least read the body language? Apparently not. He came toward me again. Unfortunately, when I’d spun away from him, I’d dodged between two tables and up against the front picture window, so I had nowhere to go. I put up my hands to push him away. He grabbed my wrists and forced me down sideways, my back on one of the tables, his body on top of mine.

Obviously he wasn't going to rape me in full view of the street, even a dark and empty 2 a.m. street. Maybe the theory was that now he'd demonstrated his manly desire, I'd let him take me where he wanted and have his fun? Likely enough it had happened that way with waitresses, hostesses, managers...

Well, not this fucking time.

He had my upper body pinned, but my legs were free. I twisted towards him and smashed my knee into the side of his. Grunt of pain from me, distinct snapping noise, howl of agony from him. He didn't let go of me until I did it again.

You can imagine the swearing. I scrambled away, ran for the front door with my keys out, then realized he wasn't going anywhere. So I ducked into the office and grabbed my bag. Before I ran out the door, I picked up the phone at the hostess station and pretended to tap in three digits, just to make him wonder, but my hands were shaking so badly I couldn't have actually dialed 911 even if he'd been coming after me with an ax.

By the time I got home my heart had stopped slamming into my eyeballs, but my brain was a shambles. I'd gone through half a dozen reactions. Torch the place. Go to the other owners. Blackmail Aaron. Leave town. Show up for

work the next day as if nothing had happened. Make up a reason for quitting, but don't tell Rob what had happened.

That was almost the worst of it—what to tell Rob. I'd dealt with men like Aaron before, and whichever way I'd done it, I'd been OK with the consequences because I'd made that choice. But here, if we left, it was one more failure, and it would feel like I was dragging Rob down.

Not that I blamed myself for failing to see the assault coming. I wasn't taking that on. But I'd been the one who thought Newport was our best chance, some kind of step toward a shiny future. Did that mean I was chasing something different than Rob was, or even different than I realized myself? For the first time, I wondered if maybe we should be following separate paths.

Still, I told him. I couldn't not. And he was shocked, he was pissed off, but he didn't seem all that surprised, and it occurred to me that Wade might have told him things about Aaron, or maybe he'd just seen warning signs that I hadn't.

"I should go beat the motherfucker up," he said. "Only it sounds like you already did that."

I laughed. "Yeah, kind of bad form to go into the ER and kick a patient's ass."

We talked about it almost all night. Rob was good. He said it was absolutely up to me how we dealt with it, barring the commission of violent felonies. But maybe what I really wanted was for him to suggest something that was the perfect solution, and since there wasn't one, he couldn't do that. Or maybe I was just angry and he had the misfortune to be in the room. When we finally went to bed and he went to comical lengths to avoid touching me, I climbed on him and held a pillow over his face long enough to scare us both.

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In the end we did the sensible thing. Somehow Rob had a way of infecting me with practical thinking against my better judgment. In the morning, he went to the café and confronted Aaron. I walked out to the lighthouse at the river's mouth and sat staring at the ocean, wishing but not wishing that I'd gone along.

First things first: Rob told Aaron he was a disgusting old fuck. Aaron, wearing a leg brace and wallowing in a fog of hangover and pain meds, tried the blackout defense, then the diminished capacity defense, finally the she-led-me-on defense. Rob told him to save his breath—we were gone and the

only question was whether Aaron was going to pay us enough severance to keep us from filing a police report and suing him.

Was that blackmail? Rob said no. I didn't care. Aaron was happy to get away with paying us three months' severance—about \$25k all told. As Wade told Rob later, it wasn't like he didn't have the money.

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Coming back to the Bay Area was not a happy homecoming for me. Every little thing seemed to make me angry, and while I knew at some level the anger was disproportionate, still it was there. I found myself yelling, snapping, sulking, hibernating, and of course smoking and drinking.

On the surface, I suppose everything seemed fine. We rented an apartment on Lake Street in the City, a one-bedroom in a creaky old Victorian—high ceiling, bay window (albeit with a cracked pane), varnished hardwood floors. We found work right away, me in an Irish bar a few blocks away, Rob in a bike store in Cow Hollow.

But restarting the brewpub plan felt like jabbing a syringe into the chest of an overdose victim. We looked at some places, talked to some people, but nothing gelled. The City itself was not an option, given the costs per square foot. I wanted to try the East Bay: Berkeley, Emeryville, West Oakland—

grungy, but with an art and music scene starting to happen. Rob was more interested in the North Bay, the little rural towns in West Marin and Sonoma. “Two million visitors a year to the Point Reyes National Seashore,” he kept reminding me, abbreviating it first to “Two million visitors a year,” then “Two million,” finally just two fingers held aloft.

There was a place we’d go in the evenings, a dirt parking lot overlooking the Golden Gate. We’d watch the sunset, the ships passing under the bridge, the gulls and hawks and pelicans drifting overhead. But it wasn’t like the old times, before Boulder and Newport, and we never talked about seeing the Green Flash. One evening while we watched the clouds catching fire, we argued our respective cases.

“Little cow towns,” I said.

“With no crime, no smog, no traffic...”

“The two million visitors just beam in and out?”

He laughed. “Leaving their money behind.”

“You just want to live there for the bike rides.” Now that we were two hundred miles from the mountains, he was putting his energy into hellishly long and difficult bike rides. No coincidence that the North Bay was crisscrossed with lonely country roads and fire trails.

“And you just want to be where the neon is.”

“Where the people are. Not the cows.” We both laughed, but then I said:
“O.K., Rob, serious question.”

“O.K. Serious answer.”

“Do you ever wonder if we have the right stuff for this, if maybe we shouldn’t be doing something else?”

“I’ve thought about that. You get a lot of time to think when you’re riding. Granted, there’s not much blood going to the brain.”

“Don’t stall, Rob.”

“If this is the glue holding us together, then yeah, for sure I think it’s right for us.”

The corollary hung there unspoken. If it wasn’t the glue...it wasn’t right?

But if it wasn’t the glue, what was? No right answer here. For a guy who wasn’t devious, he’d set one hell of a devious trap. It was his way of asking if I loved him. And the answer was, yes, I did, but maybe not as much as he wanted me to, maybe not as much as I wanted to figure out what to do with my life.

“Yeah, never mind,” I said. “Just rambling.”

In a weird way, I think Aaron's money was what had us stalled. Or me, at least. I'd always—well, since I was sixteen and my mom went on welfare—had to work hard to stay afloat, and while that was a struggle and it pissed me off, it gave me structure. It kept me moving and it simplified my decision-making.

Now, though, Aaron's money took away the day-to-day pressure, and it gave me time to think in a way that was probably dangerous. Was this the best I could do? Was it the best thing for Rob? Would we look back in ten years and think we'd made the right choices?

Then we got the phone call. Early morning, Rob getting into his lycra for a ride in the fog, me hungover, dry mouth, pain underneath my eyes, smoke on my skin. Rob: "Yeah. Hey, Chelsea." Zach's wife. "What is it?" Pause. "Oh no." Another pause. "Oh, shit."

I'd never heard Rob's voice like that. Hungover or not, I was awake right away.

Zach had been walking on the freeway, on 101 in Ukiah, near the brew-pub where he worked. Drunk, she thought. She assumed. He'd been hit by a truck. Killed instantly.

It certainly wasn't the first funeral I'd been to—with my family and some of the people I'd hung out with. Far from it—but it was the worst one. Chelsea

raving with shock and anger, the little girl utterly stunned, Zach's parents—a couple of Riverside County rednecks—pathetically dignified, Wade and Rob drunk all weekend, endlessly reminiscing about their teenage misdeeds with Zach.

As for me, I'd liked the guy in our brief acquaintance, but I found myself wishing he would come back to life so I could kick his ass. His death was sad, it was heartbreaking when you considered the child, but how surprising was it? I'd never really bought Wade and Rob's story about Zach turning over a new leaf.

I don't think Rob knew I was seeing it like that, certainly I didn't tell him, but I felt that little bit of separation between us. Of course, the brewpub plans went into suspended animation. So did our social life and our sex life. All Rob seemed able to do was ride himself into exhaustion—over the bridge, up Mt. Tam, out to Point Reyes, down the coast to Santa Cruz.

The only place I could get him to go with me was the parking lot by the Golden Gate. One evening, about a month after Zach died, we got take-out burgers from Johnny Rockets in the Marina and pigged out there above the bridge, waiting for the sunset. We made out lazily, too bloated to be serious, and eventually nodded off.

When I woke up, the sun was slipping into a dark margin of haze on the horizon. It lost its brightness, turning into a small pale disk, and then suddenly it was bright green, the green of Astroturf and four-leaf clovers.

For a moment I just stared, and then, by the time I could get Rob awake and looking in the right direction, the disk had sunk below the horizon. He nodded and smiled as if he'd seen it, but I knew he hadn't. He drifted back to sleep, and I hugged him as hard as I could, because I knew I had to leave.

§

Usually breakups are easy for me—ugly, but easy. Someone (not always me) says or does something unforgivable, the other person says, “Fuck you, that’s it, we’re done,” and it’s over. There may be another hideous scene or two, but basically, it’s a clean break.

This, I was afraid, wouldn't be so simple. Rob wasn't going to be the one to stab the relationship in the heart, and even if I could bring myself to do it, he'd probably go way too far in forgiving me, trying to make it work, hanging on. So I did the only thing I could think of to spare us both. I left in the middle of the night.

After three moves in one year, I didn't have a ton of stuff to take with me. I'd surreptitiously packed one bag the previous day, and I tossed the rest of

what I needed into a duffel as Rob snored. Clothes, CDs, a few books, a stuffed giraffe I'd had since I was six. I took a couple of things that, strictly speaking, belonged to Rob more than me—a framed photo of our crew at the café in the wine country, a book of Neruda poems we'd read to each other one Valentine's Day—but I figured he'd be OK with it since it meant I was thinking of him.

I should have left a note. True. But I couldn't get my thoughts together, and I had a flight to catch. I did leave a compilation CD of breakup songs: a little Joan Jett, a little Pixies, a little Nuns. When I got off the plane at JFK, I bought a postcard of Times Square and scrawled this while I waited for a taxi:

Rob-- It was great, you were sweet, but one century was enough.

Love always,

M.

I know that was flippant and insufficient, and if he hates me for leaving the way I did and having nothing more to say about it than that, fair enough. I'm sure he can't imagine doing that to someone he loved, and he's probably right, he probably never would.

But maybe some years on, we'll run into each other again. I'll have a chance to apologize, and he'll have a chance to rethink it. By then he'll be settled, somewhere in the mountains or on a deserted coast, with a dull, faded,

comfortable wife and adorably pesky children; a house he's half paid for; a job he doesn't entirely hate. Maybe then he'll see that it wasn't entirely selfish on my part, that I had to leave for both of us to understand what we really wanted. For him, a piece of wild country and a way to be part of it. For me, well, that's harder, but something with music in it, something brighter, something that's always one move away.

TOM GARTNER's fiction and poetry have appeared in numerous journals, including *California Quarterly*, *The Madison Review*, *New Limestone Review*, *Kestrel*, and most recently *Twelve Winters*. One story was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He lives in California, just north of the Golden Gate, and works as a buyer for an independent bookstore in San Francisco.