

I-80

On Sundays Walter Purcell drove from Jonesboro to see his daughter, Allison, in Smithtown. Walter had made the drive all through his long retirement, and at first used his wife, Cecilia, as navigator. By the time Cecilia died, Walter knew the route so well he didn't need a navigator. But he was a lonely old man, and sometimes he'd mutter corrections to the route as if Cecilia still sat across from him, and had made a mistake.

He turned east onto I-80 at the North Bay on-ramp, the long, elevated one that rode high over salt marshes. At last he settled into the far right lane of the six-lane, north-bound Interstate, and engaged his cruise control at 54 miles per hour. Then all he had to do was steer and remember his exit.

First came Andersonville, then Fairfield, followed by Sutter Junction, Suisun City, and Smithtown. Three cities beginning with S, and you got off at the third. All the cities looked the same, with their signs for Carl's, Jr. and Albertson's and Mattress City—not an actual city, it turned out. You could get confused if you fell into a daydream, and suddenly looked around. You had to remember the three Ss, and then, at Smithtown, that there were three exits: 717, 721, and 727.

You took the 721 exit and quickly moved into the left lane of the westbound Boulevard of the Americas. You had to get over there right away because the next turn came up quickly, and you might not be able to cross. Miss the turn, and you'd be headed for the air force base, and

have to circle around. Cecilia had directed him that way once, and they ended up in a neighborhood where no one spoke English.

But that wouldn't happen. He'd get into the left lane and turn onto Madison, and then, because there wasn't a light, watch for the street name: San Marcos. Allison gave him a GPS a year or so ago, but because of the turn onto San Marcos he couldn't use it. The woman giving directions sounded too much like Cecilia, always holding forth on a lane change or turn when it was too late to maneuver. On Madison she spoke up abruptly, warning him of his incipient turn but also startling him, so that he sped past San Marcos all the way down to the Conoco station where they used to buy grapefruit, or was that in Sutter Junction? And then the mechanical woman scolded him for missing the turn!

San Marcos led to the cul-de-sac, called San Marcos Terrace, where Allison lived in her white stucco house with the orange tile roof. Of course, all of the houses had tile roofs, and white stucco siding, but they weren't exactly the same: on the first, the garage sat on the north; on the second, on the south—and so on. Allison's garage sat on the north, and out back stood a windbreak of eucalyptus, to arrest some of the noise from I-80.

The neighborhood was full of divorced, single women and, on Sundays, the fathers who visited them. Walter had sometimes entertained the whimsical notion he might duck into any one of the houses and find a welcoming daughter. To avoid confusion, he'd taped Allison's house number, 22209, to his dash.

Walter and Cecilia had lived in a white stucco house, too, although it had a composition roof. The house was a 1950s ranch style, built out near Oyster Bay after the shipyards closed. You could see the Bay back then, or rather, the plain of mud and oil and derelict ships around it. But by the time Allison left for college so many houses had sprung up, and so many flowers and

ornamental trees been planted—so much asphalt laid down, so many insects sprayed for—that you couldn't even catch a whiff of salt air.

Allison moved to Reno with her husband, then to Smithtown because of her work as an optometrist. By then the husband had disappeared. His name was Tom. He voted Democratic and Walter never trusted him.

Walter had a lady friend, Julia, who convinced him to sell the house on Oyster Bay after Cecilia died. Julia was a realtor. Why did he need all that room? she asked. Wasn't he lonely, and burdened with memories? She found a tidy, white stucco on Yukon, in a new area rising up from the old San Andreas Landfill, and he made a good profit off the Oyster Bay place. He'd hardly settled in, though, when he had his heart attack.

He'd wondered if Julia was faithless, but she kept dropping by with fruit baskets. Of course, Walter wasn't interested in romance, or capable of it. Julia reminded him of his daughter, Allison, or maybe even Cecilia way back when they lived in Ventura, except Cecilia and Allison were blondes and Julia had black hair, black as shoe polish. She wore short skirts and had great legs. She knew he liked her legs. She'd sit across from him, shuffling her paperwork, negotiating on her cell phone, crossing and recrossing her gorgeous legs. Walter's lips went dry.

Julia got him out of the little white stucco into a sky-blue cement block duplex over on Valdez, where you didn't have to mow the yard, and a nurse, a young Latino man with long hair, came around to see if your heart still ticked. They let him keep his car, because he only drove to Carl's, Jr. occasionally, and to Smithtown to see his daughter, Allison, on Sundays. Julia drew him out a route where he wouldn't have to take I-80 to Smithtown, but it was too complicated.

Julia's timing was superb, because he turned a profit on the white stucco, too, even though he'd hardly lived there. Afterwards, real estate went bust. People kept downsizing, losing money with every sale. It was as though life were running in reverse.

Coincidentally, Julia disappeared. Walter tried to call her but she'd been disconnected. He missed her like a family member. He had distressing dreams about her legs but couldn't remember her face. He should have saved a picture of her.

There remained Allison, his divorced daughter, who lived in Smithtown at 22209 San Marcos Terrace. He passed the two exits in Sutter Junction, recognizing the Denny's where Allison and he sometimes had lunch. Afterwards, they took in a movie, or sometimes they'd visit Penney's so she could buy him a shirt, even though he had more than enough shirts already. "It'll end up at the Goodwill," he said once, but only once, because Allison didn't like to hear that. She needed a husband, he thought. If she found one, Walter would give him his shirts.

Being with Allison was unlike being with Julia. Allison was quiet, while Julia talked so much, Walter didn't need to. Allison spoke tentatively, with many pauses, and Walter, being her father, felt he should impart his wisdom concerning insurance policies and the best car to buy. But nowadays he could only shake his head. "I don't know, Allison."

"What don't you know, Dad?"

"I don't know about insurance, or the best restaurants, or the best movies. I liked cowboy pictures, especially with Randolph Scott, but they don't make those now. I don't know anything anymore. I don't understand the world."

"You know *everything*, Dad."

Sometimes, Julia had said the same thing, patting his shoulder, her long legs leaning into the space next to him as he drove. But she couldn't possibly have meant it, because she kept talking, giving him little opportunity to divulge his wisdom.

Smithtown! He knew he'd reached it, because on clear days you could just make out the mountains. All he had to do was watch the exits. He passed 717 first, and then . . . and then . . .

There was no 721. No evidence it had ever been there, no mounded up dirt and gravel to indicate it was being constructed or removed . . . nothing. In a blur he picked out the sign for Boulevard of the Americas, affixed to the viaduct overhead, so this was the spot. He slowed to fifty, then forty, peering right and left intently as if on a country road. There was no down ramp for 721, and no exit off I-80's southbound lanes.

A mammoth truck, its cab nearly as high as the viaduct, bore down almost to his rear bumper, swerved sharply, and shrieked its air-horn in sustained rebuke. Walter pulled to the shoulder, shaking, his heart thumping wildly. He didn't understand.

Slowly, as his blood calmed, Walter drove forward, holding the car to the shoulder's far right. Cars zoomed past faster than he could distinguish them, their horns dopplering quickly away in shrieks and growls, their slipstreams tugging at his car, then shaking it in backwash. At last Walter made out an exit, not far now, and its number: 727. The last Smithtown exit, right where it should be.

What had happened?

Maybe nothing. But he'd turned at 721 perhaps a hundred times. And Exit 719 was still there, with the Denny's behind it.

He accelerated a little for 727. He tried to remember if he'd ever come this way.

He turned right on Countryside, and right again on Madison, and had no problem finding the turn to San Marcos, even though he came in from the north. In some ways, this was a superior route. Farther, but all right turns. You didn't have to cross traffic.

San Marcos was not how he remembered it, but he'd always entered the south arm, rather than the north. These northern houses were all made of white stucco, too, with roofs of orange tile, and with alternating garages, but it didn't matter. Allison lived not on San Marcos but San Marcos Terrace, a cul-de-sac tucked up under I-80.

And here it was, lined with eight white stucco houses with their alternating garages. Now he merged with the route he would have taken if he'd been able to exit I-80 at 721. He counted houses, counted garages, until he spotted the faint oil smear on the driveway, probably from his own car which was growing old, that was one of his identifying markers. Yes! The garage stood on the north, and out back were the eucalyptus trees. He cut the engine, released a long sigh, and opened the car door. He heard the echoing roar, like a river in a canyon, of I-80.

Slowly, he came to his feet, and glanced at the door of his daughter's house: 22277. *No*. He bent to check the number on his dash: 22209. But this was the right house!

Unnerved, he walked down the driveway and onto the street, until he could read the house number opposite Allison's: 22280. He stood as if paralyzed, not understanding, just as a woman came out of her garage with a watering can. She was a blonde, willowy like Allison, and stood for a long time, too, staring at him through glasses so thick and oversized they distorted her face.

Suddenly, a border collie ran up from behind her and onto the street. The dog raced toward Walter but then dropped to its belly and began to whimper. "Ruby," Walter murmured, and the dog turned her head, as if she, too, were trying to understand.

The willowy blonde hurried up and grabbed the dog by the collar. She didn't speak. She stared at Walter through her thick glasses and then dragged the collie across the street again. Then both woman and dog were gone, and the garage door ground shut, jerking at the last and slamming down heavily.

Walter turned about and studied the eucalyptus trees and the garage on the north side. He'd mixed up his numbers, somehow, but this *was* the right place. Even so, he wondered if he'd make this trip again. He'd broach the matter with Allison. No reason at all she couldn't drive down to Jonesboro. I-80 ran both ways.

He pressed her doorbell, and as it chimed heard a rush of feet, and a cat yowling. He didn't remember the cat. Allison owned a dog, didn't she?

The door opened and a woman stood for a long moment, half-obscured by screen and the darkness behind her. The wild thought passed through him that this woman wasn't his daughter. Then she called him "Dad," and welcomed him inside.

Her house was not as he remembered. The walls were in different places and the colors had shifted, but then he dropped into Aunt Laura's wonderful old rocking chair. He'd refitted and refinished it himself. He reached under the seat, feeling for a notch he hadn't been able to sand out. It was there.

Allison scurried about her little kitchen. When she stepped into better light he saw that she'd dyed her hair black. It made her look younger.

"How's your heart, Benjamin?" Allison asked, pulling a TV tray beside him, putting down a dish with three fig cookies, and pouring apple juice. Ordinarily, she kept shortbread cookies for him, but yes, he liked apple juice. The puzzling thing was why she called him

Benjamin, his middle name. Cecilia called him that, but only when she was angry. He hadn't been called Benjamin for so long it took him a moment to realize that was his name.

"Heart's still pumping," Walter said. "How are things for you, Allison?"

"Oh, fine. Some arguments with the neighbor about her dog. She lets it get out and it poops in my flower bed, and scares Patsy half to death. We could work it out, but she won't even talk to me. Where *is* Patsy?"

Patsy curled by Walter's ankles, arched high her back, and issued purrs.

"Pick her up, Dad. She likes you."

So he did, and the cat settled contentedly into his lap.

"Wonderful how she comes to you. She doesn't like men. Not usually."

"Yes," Walter said, not understanding why the cat liked him and purred like that old bench grinder he had, with its fine bearings that would turn a full minute after he cut the switch.

"I bought a new towel rack—you remember where the old one came out, by the mirror, there? Do you think you could put it up for me tomorrow? I have all the tools you need."

Walter wondered if he could lift his arms so high, or even turn a screwdriver. It was as though she thought he was a younger man, and he was flattered. Of course, she was his daughter, trying to make him feel good. That was why fathers had daughters, and worked so hard to please them. "Sure," he said. "No trouble at all."

"There's a Western on at that strip mall in Suison City."

"By the Denny's?"

"No, the other strip mall. Up from the Culver's."

It couldn't be, he thought. They'd stopped making Westerns. "Who's in it?"

"I don't know." She laughed. "Not Randolph Scott."

No, not Randolph Scott, but any Western would do. Allison stepped into the middle of the living room and pirouetted as if modeling her prom dress. She wore baggy jeans and a faded Barry Bonds T-shirt. “I don’t have to get all fixed up, do I, just to go to Denny’s? Just a date with my dad?”

He stared at the black hair he didn’t remember, and stroked the cat that ought to be a dog. He believed this nice woman must be his daughter. “No,” he said, as the cat launched another torrent of purrs. “You’re fine as you are.”