

# Pothole

A Novel

Richard Hamel

This is a sample of the novel. The full version, 286 pages, is available for purchase via [www.SidestepProductions.com/books/pothole](http://www.SidestepProductions.com/books/pothole). (Here you will be offered the opportunity to view other parts of the book, along with background information on the author.)

## PREFACE

There's no such thing as a bad orgasm; just bad karma.

Maggie-D once offered up this droplet of wisdom to a member of the clergy who unexpectedly found himself dually matched during an impromptu chat on “sexual misdeeds.” Flushed with embarrassment at finding himself a bit tongue-tied because of her pithy line of reasoning, he relented to the disarmingly innocent-looking, unrepentantly candid, young woman who always listened to the innate good sense of her heart first before accepting conventionality blindly. (Often, even the most hardened were moved by Maggie-D in ways they could not have fathomed.) Incidentally, but not totally unpredictably, this particular Franciscan, not long after this late evening intercourse with Maggie-D, left the brotherhood to, rumor has it, manage a gay men's counseling service in Encino, California. But, that's just incidental.

Maggie-D has always lived an honest life, viewing people—as she sees all living and inanimate things—multi-dimensionally and with varying interpretations. One might call it a “what it is, is what it is—which is good enough” approach to life. And it isn't beyond the girl to chat existentialism (though, she'd never call it that) one moment, which ultimately might flow next into a conversation about god's (that's with a small “g”) earthly delights (like *the big-O*) before settling on how beautiful people are—or how crappy the Cleveland Indian baseball team is doing. To her, there is no such thing as a non sequitur, just as there is no true doughnut without a hole. All things are at least randomly connected and make sense at the end. It is simply her gift to see ahead of the matter at hand. It is what makes her free.

This isn't, however, a story about divinity; but of the divine spark in us that yearns to flame. To living large—two flaying arms stretched out large!—*lovingly*.

## PART 1

ONE  
*Cappadocia*

‘What... what are you doing *here?*’ Maggie-D jettisoned herself into Jason Mays like shot Silly Putty to tiled wall. ‘This is too freakie for words. You’re here,’ her hand gripping the collars of his windbreaker, ‘You’re here in my cartoon dream! How the fuck did you find me?’ Not letting him answer yet, she pulled her other dear friend into the circle after she’d dismounted. ‘This is—*Trip!*’

Of course her visiting friend had heard all about this mystery man. Iris shook his hand eagerly.

Mindful of the impression that his traipsing around the world as he does often sounds like bragging rather than a result of the fact that any place other than “home” is both far more interesting and less expensive, therefore just the way he lives, Jason sheepishly declared to the two bouncy women and the littler one shadowing them, that his time was up with the Tibetans.

‘After six months in Dharamsala writing press releases for their English language newspaper, I thought the Dalai Lama’s crew wouldn’t hold it against me if I moved on to other things.’

Trip couldn’t find his groove with the Aborigines either. (Bouncing from continent to continent was not uncommon with this wanderluster.) After an abbreviated rundown of his disenchantment with living in Australia—this after he’d learned that, no, Maggie-D had not gotten his letter (but that wasn’t unusual because of the shoddy mail system where they currently stood)—about his work in Morocco, Trip apologized for not having warned her that he was on his way. ‘I had no idea you’d still be here; I took a chance. Surprised?’

*I’d say so*, her eyes blinked twice.

‘How are you pussycat?’ Trip stroked her right shoulder twice.

So, over a jug of locally fermented red wine, Maggie-D would start to bring Trip current on happenings.”

This is, however, getting ahead of the story...

## TWO

*Pothole*

Pothole (not the town's real name, but fitting), Ohio, is a short hitchhike away from Cleveland, "Rock-N-Roll City," to which Maggie-D would venture off for the occasional movie release, baseball game or *thing* generally unavailable in that squalid town of hers. Pothole is where she was born, raised and at seventeen, left—certain never to be dragged back to again.

The town isn't all that small, about fifteen thousand *nice-enough* people she'd say. But Pothole feels small. One might suppose people move there 'cause they can't handle either manic Cleveland, or the stillness of country living. Pothole is, well, neither. And in the '70's and '80's, the town was down on its knee-patches. So much of the local economy had been dependent on the nation's steel and manufacturing base, that when the Japanese began kicking our big, fat, American butts by doing things better, faster, and for a lot less—well, most people just found themselves unemployed—or *under employed* as the federal unemployment statistics prefers to chart. And, as Maggie-D's dad often said, "Idle time is the devil's workshop." He always did mess up his aphorisms. Take her big brother, Brad, for example. His preoccupation in those days was (come to think of it, still is) to remain underemployed at *The Store* while racing his macho car (a '72 Ford Mach One with an engine as big as Maggie's old V.W.) down Harris Avenue with an open, long-neck, bottle of Budweiser between his thighs. That, and getting into fist fights.

Yep, the boy's a redneck.

Harvey Duffy (that's Maggie-D's *dear-ol' dad*) he lives for The Store—a NAPA auto parts franchise he built and has toiled over ever since Maggie-D was about two and the Beatles broke up. The *Fab Four* have no bearing on this story, just a reference point. Anyway, The Store is the center of his universe, his ball and chain. Priscilla, that's what Harvey calls his other ball and chain (mother Duffy) is a housewife. 'I don't,' as Maggie-D would say matter-of-factly, 'bother to use the *feministically correct* term *homemaker*.' Poor-ol' mother Duffy was more wedded to just being inside

the house with drapes closed and prescription drugs in reach than to creating a life within the three-bedroom stucco prison in which she felt at peace.

‘To each her own,’ Maggie-D would say apologetically.

In a nutshell, that’s the Duffy family. Wait. There’s the crazy basset hound, *Hitler*, her trash brother Brad brought home, named and neglected when he was twelve and Maggie-D was ten. Still, Maggie-D’s the one who fed the nearly blind mongrel with the little black square patch under his nose—a mongrel that mauled bicycle tires and sent children up trees. Maggie-D did, eventually, grow to like the beast—once she changed his name to Charlie (as in Chaplin).

Okay, *now* that’s the Duffy family. Pathetic, I know, but she was happy enough with them.

## THREE

Sixteen years and one day after Neil Armstrong took his first giant step into history, Maggie-D was celebrating her sixteenth birthday. It was July 21, 1985, and she was with her best friend—really, her only friend who didn't think of her as some kind of freak. As they'd done every summer since they'd met in fourth grade, Maggie-D and Clara Glover were kicking-back alongside of the creek that ran outside of the big local park that no one ever brought their kids to anymore because of the drunken fools that hung around there (present company excluded) and because the city had no money to keep the flowers in bloom, or even to keep the grass from becoming the field of weeds it now was. But, if you ventured off just around the hill that separated the park from one of Pothole's few undeveloped but abandoned pieces of land, and the cement railroad bridge behind the Maple trees, there was a nice vein of water for cooling off hot toes and some nice shade to waste another day in.

'Why ain't you at The Store ta-day?' Clara was laid splayed-out on the plastic tablecloth the two always used as a sitting blanket. She stared up through the branches so intently it was worrisome. Maggie-D was picking milkweeds and spinning around, grabbing for the sun's light that trickled through tree branches like some light-hearted child-of-the-earth loon.

'Harvey gave me the day off...and five bucks. The dear.'

'Why you always so good ta him,' Clara scolded her silly friend.

Clara sat up.

'And why do you always see things so matter-of-factly, Clara dear?'

'If that butt-hole daddy of yours gets it his way, you'll be slavin' away selling car parts until you turn into your mother.'

'Oh, mommy dearest, she's into her own thing. I really don't think that's my destiny.'

'And what *is* your destiny, you crazy white chick?' Clara sat up.

'Shit if I know. Get a good-enough real job, so I don't have to breath-in Harvey's fifty cigarettes a day addiction or have to hear him bitch at Brad when he drags in—*I guess*. Maybe marry some guy who's got a

permanent job—a guy who won't come home all fucked-up all the time and go crazy on me. You know, a decent boy who'll just let me go about my business—I suppose.'

That really wasn't this teen's genuine idea of a destiny. Having heard Clara describe where she thought she was headed for as essentially the same, Maggie-D was trying to spare her best friend's feelings by not raising the bar on a load of "what ifs."

'You sure like that word, fuck.' Clara was being evasive.

'I do. It's my favorite word—so versatile. I fuckin' love it.' Maggie-D squinted happily at her friend.

After her spinning made Maggie-D even more light-headed than her friend thought she perpetually was, she came over to Clara's perch on the table and bumped shoulders with her best friend as she sipped her 7UP soft drink in the silence of the moment. Maggie-D knew what Clara was thinking, because she was thinking the same. *Get what you can get and be happy with it.*

But the sadness in Maggie-D's best friend's young eyes reflected the certain fate of so many of Pothole's teens. The topic was turning sour. Not so much for Maggie. She never seemed to mind that ugly town with its ugly promise of unhappiness—where sitting on the porch drinking store-brand beer from Kroger and swatting flies with a year-old issue of *Good Housekeeping* was about as good as it got. Maggie-D, on the other hand, also knew that if it was meant to be that she live an entirely different life—one of purpose and adventure—then so be it. But for her best friend, it just seemed she needed more and wasn't likely to go after it.

That saddened Maggie-D.

'Hey,' the taller of the two girls proposed, if just to derail the downer subject, 'how `bout I whop your butt with a little seven car stud, *high-low?*'

Clara crossed her brows. 'You suck girl. I take your *daddy's money* and go buy me a chocolate sundae and eat-it in front of your sorry poker-loosing ass.'

Clara smiled wickedly. The two hugged. Maggie fished through her bag to find those old playing cards.

## FOUR

It was around the time that the “back-to-school” announcements taped to store-front windows and screeched out in between radio “top ten” countdowns had lost their end-of-summer shock value that Jason meandered into Maggie’s life and spiced it up for good. It wasn’t that he was anything special. He was though. It was one of those power-of-ideas things that only gels at a specific time, when a specific person says the right thing. We get them all the time, but we never see the importance of them until much later, in reflection—that’s if the thing turned out either really bitchin’ or really shitty.

The Store’s heavy wood-framed glass door was hidden with STP, Champion, Mopar decals. The buzzer was tripped as the heavy door opened, but it failed to get the attention of Lester, Harvey’s full-time parts pro, while Harvey was busy retrieving something or another for a telephone customer. It was Maggie-D who put her Jane Austen novel to rest face down on the edge of the brown Formica counter she reserved as her own space, dropped down from her World War II dated metal high-stool, and welcomed the good-looking guy in blue denim shirt, khakis and ponytail to The Store.

‘Hi. Do you happen to have a replacement one of these?’

The poor, sensitive ponytail guy was holding up a radiator hose. You could see that he spent little time under the hood—unlike ninety-nine-point-ninety-nine percent of the motor-heads who made The Store their first home.

‘I think I can accommodate. Does your car have a name, model and, dare I say, year?’

The slender stranger whose teen years were not far behind him showed the young girl the most wonderful reply: straight teeth; baby face; kind, knowing eyes. ‘It’s a V.W. Dasher, a `78—if I believe the guy who sold it to me two week ago. But I call her *Betsy*.’

‘Ookaay darling. I’ll have one of the guys in back pull you down one of these thingamajigs while I ring you up.’

*Betsy*. Maggie-D shook her head happily.

The customer grabbed a replacement Prestone with his clean hand, the new hose in the other. He pushed The Store's door open with his butt before smiling goodbye to the counter girl who returned to her stool where a Rubix Cube and Austen novel lay ready to entertain her next. The already quite-tall-for-her-age daughter of the store's owner, sporting a Cleveland Indian's baseball cap (worn backwards to cover most of her thick burnt-orangish hair, cut sporting short in back—a style that fit her persona but not her generally inactive lifestyle) thought to herself—*now there's a* (grasping a passage she'd read that morning) *soulful person*

It was at an hour past lunch-time that Maggie-D bolted from The Store to get a sandwich (and to get away from the oily, synthetic, fumes that permeated the auto parts store) at Chester's. It's a sandwich joint where she spent much of her after-school hours. 'Better than going home to the house that is just *too quiet* (meaning dreary) sometimes.' And, guess who was there trying to eat? *Trying*, because sensitive ponytail guy was struggling with Chester's wall-mounted menu, which didn't have anything but "dead animal" (his words to Maggie-D later) on it. She intervened with the suggestion of provolone, tomato and fried egg. He held no moral objections to eggs.

Jason introduced himself as *Trip* as he sat down across from her booth table, even though there were plenty of empty ones around. This excellent choice perked her right up. She tossed her book and ball cap into the straw bag that served as her purse.

'Welcome to my booth. What brings you forth through our fair town?' Maggie-D fluffed her hair with two shakes of her nimble hands.

'Just breaking down. I've been rambling through some of this country's great back highways.'

'Well, Pothole ain't all that great. It's not much off the beaten path, either.' Playfully trying out one of the techniques she'd read about in a fanzine she never bought but sometimes perused at a hair salon she occasionally went to," Maggie-D corrected him with girlish battings of unfettered, naturally long eyelashes.

'Yeah, well, I'd just decided to head for a sizable town for a book run—maybe a movie and a meal not originating from a can. That's when

steam from Betsy's hood told me that something was awry. You got a good size sandwich there. Pastrami?'

Maggie-D nodded in the affirmative. 'Usually I get the half size. I think my eyes are bigger than my stomach today.' Then thinking back to two minutes ago, she added, 'Shit. I'm sorry. Does my flesh meal gross you out?'

Trip could deal with it. He wasn't a veggie Nazi. He ate his pickle first.

'So,' he opened with a chomp, 'are you one of Potholes local productions?'

'I am indeed. Most folks around here might not cop to that, but my birth certificate at Valley Mercy will document that less-than-interesting fact. Friends call me Maggie-D.'

Jason said she seemed like a pretty sharp character. Maggie-D countered with an 'Okay. I'll see your complement with a *thank-you-very-much* and raise you with a *you're-not-from-anywhere-around-here-are-you, good looking?*'

Jason was the first Alaskan she had ever met, and the only one. So not having anything better to do, Maggie-D pumped him for information.

Born and raised in a town of just more than five hundred called Moose Creek (a three-hour snowmobile ride away from Fairbanks) Jason one day woke up with the need to just go away. And, so he did. Off he went at nineteen to trace some of the back roads a famous Indian (of the American variety) wrote about in a book called "Blue Highways." William Heatmoon's narratives must have really grabbed him because they caused the tall, dark, stranger to make the drastic leap from small town Alaska to the great Lower Forty-Eight on the written observations of someone he'd never even met. One year and six months later, after an excursion into Costa Rica and Nicaragua because he "needed a change of scenery," Jason picked up his back-roading USA trail in Florida, headed northwest, and blew a hose in Pothole. Trip often zigzagged his travels like that, proving that 'the shortest distance ain't usually the funnest.'

'Your life sounds romantic,' she said to this handsome boy. 'You must be rich.'

Trip stirred his second tall plastic cup of ice tea with his forefinger. He assured her that that was not the case, and that he didn't need much. "Live simply so others may simply live," is what he tossed out like some well-known cliché. He said he did just fine working the odd jobs.

'Like picking apples, odd jobs? Or tending bar?'

'Never picked an apple myself, but I tried my hand at coffee beans, and I did the visiting bartender thing in San José. No, I mean odder than the odd job. Sometimes I'll drum up support in rich suburban neighborhoods for membership in Greenpeace or Oxfam. I'll work in a hospice in hopes that those departing this earth won't feel too alone. A couple of months back I labored in the fields with the Sandinistas. That was my coffee bean picking experience. But that was for *gratis*. Much of my work ends up as volunteering. But, hey, what better way to meet people, huh?'

Maggie's adolescent mind got dizzy from the life experiences he rattled off so matter-of-factly. He wasn't showing off. In fact, she had to prod him for each little bit of history. He was just so—Zen.

'Is everybody from Moose Creek like you?' She knew she was being rhetorical, but she liked to fish. She was wondering if he too was the town oddball.

'Alaskans can be a pretty quirky bunch. It's the isolation and cold that does it. In my town though, those who leave don't usually come back to share their tales. But, I get your question. Having lived with my Uncle and Aunt instead of my parents—long story—and being accepted into college at sixteen with friends several years older than myself, along with a fascination for seeing what's out there, I suppose I stood out from our little crowd. Then when I dropped-out of college one semester before graduation, packed my rust-bucket of a Jeep for my new life down south, I guess those who didn't really know me may have thought I was a bit frost bitten in the frontal lobe. But that suits me alright. I'm here eating a sandwich with you and they're freezing their asses off.'

Trip crunched his ice eagerly.

*What a character*, thought the girl with freckles and eyes of green as crisp and delightful as the dill pickle she crunched. She shook her head in awe, her face revealing a thirst for such living.

'You have—sorry if this embarrasses you,' he offered up so as to deflect some attention onto her, 'the most disarming face. I mean, the way you use half of your bangs to hide behind while your eyes burn in openness and mission.'

No one had ever said anything like that to Maggie-D before. In response, she just batted her eyes once and pushed out an exaggerated smile.

'My friend, Clara, she refers to me as brutally sweet—thinks it's my natural defense against the *white-devil poison* of this town. She's such a dear, always looking out for me. But my dear-ol' dad says my face looks like it had the misfortune of being on the losing end of a bird shot full of freckles. So, I'll agree it's disarming, in a spotty sort of way.'

Jason confirmed what Maggie-D already knew. 'Your friend, Clara, sounds like the best kind of friend.' He didn't comment on what he thought about her old man. (A heap of shit.) 'And your hair, did you do that?'

Maggie-D's eyes drew upwards. 'Nope, those feathers of blonde that's sproutin' out from the top like some flattened pineapple is what Rita, she works the beauty shop I sometimes go to, calls "birthmark hair."'

Silence as Trip finished the last bite of his Maggie-D special.

'So Maggie, what are your plans for the future? Going to make a name for yourself in this town? You certainly seem to me like the sort of *individual* college would appeal to.'

'Don't really know. I'm a 'B' student with a 'B' life. Harvey, that's my dear-ol' dad, he's clinging on to the dream of my running The Store—though I don't think that's what the gods have in mind for young Maggie-D. I thought of nursing, or maybe teaching,' which she thought of just then, 'I like people. And, I have my hopes up to meet a nice guy so we can just, I don't know, live okay. You know?'

Jason bobbed his head knowingly.

‘Well sister, if you ever find yourself in Moose Creek, ask around for Trip. I’m not likely to be there, but my Uncle and Aunt Paxton will welcome you like family.’

And with that, off Jason went back into the world.

## FIVE

About the time the Space Shuttle Challenger reminded us all that technology is fallible (another reference that has no bearing on anything, nor is meant to associate space travel with Maggie-D's life), Eric Stevens came to the Duffy house. The dinner had just been cleared from the pantry and the pizza boxes pushed into the overstuffed kitchen trash pail. He and Maggie-D's big brother, Brad, had been semi-good buddies in tenth grade before Eric moved to Missouri with his mom. He needed to get away from their old man's drinking and right hook. Eric's father had since sworn off the bottle (per the judge's decree), so Eric was back, along with his mom, and the family unit was intact, again, in Pothole.

The lump of man with stinky black socks and soiled orange and white striped work shirt chose not to get up even though it was clear that someone was rapping on the front porch door, eyes searching through its glass panes for evidence of civility. 'Maggie Ann,' he barked, 'Where's the Punk?' *Punk* was Harvey's pet name for big brother Brad. With such endearment, it was no wonder Maggie-D had failed to use such proper designations as *mom* and *dad* since the days of her first period.

*It's sad isn't it,* thought Maggie-D as she looked up from the final chapter of a James Joyce novel she'd picked up at a yard sale, *being the eldest offspring? You're either the heir to the throne or the family's crash-test dummy.*

Brad, sorry to say, was considered the latter.

Maggie-D worried about him.

'Sorry Harvey. Number-one son must have slipped by us again; probably out there making you proud or somethin'.'

'One of his *colleagues* is wrapping on the door. Maybe *you* should deal with *it* or hose it off the porch.'

Harvey did speak his mind. And for those who have not been properly introduced to Maggie-D's father, she'd describe him as a hard man, towering at five foot two, Mediterranean complexion (spawned from the connection of a Greek Merchant Marine and a washer-woman of English and Scottish ancestry), perpetual five o'clock shadow, square chin,

pointy nose, eyes the color of 50W Pennzoil, junk-food belly and a temper like a pissed-off ferret. Maggie-D shared few of his physical attributes, which was a good thing. Luckily, she inherited her mother's complexion, eyes, and height. Her hair? She hadn't the foggiest notion of where that came from. Anyway, her once Army Staff Sergeant father was known throughout town as a hot head—though he'd keep his temper in check when he had to discipline his precocious daughter. If he'd raise his hand to Maggie-D, she'd cheerfully remind the angry bastard that Clara's mother worked for the county's Child Protective Services section: 'And you know how much she hates honkies, Harvey.' Frustrated, he'd then go looking for the Punk.

Maggie-D padded through the musty living room in her Daffy Duck bedroom slippers toward the front door where Priscilla sat five feet from the television behind a TV tray, filling in the paint-by-numbers canvas in her usual state. Harvey couldn't extract himself from the sofa, Seven & Seven, and *Hill Street Blues* to even yell a "Don't just stand there you fool, come in," to Eric.

Maggie-D worried about him too, Harvey that is.

After informing the anxious visitor—a boy she'd met only once before, before he and his mom fled Pothole in the middle of the night a couple of years back—that Brad was not home, Eric surprised the shadowy figure behind the rusty screen door in black Joan Jett T-shirt that he'd come to visit her.

*The first string running back calling on me? Fancy that,* Maggie-D thought, tapping her pen to her book and writing her telephone number down for the boy.

## SIX

A *relationship* ensued not long after Eric Stevens surprised the Duffys with his return to Pothole. Forgoing dreams of an NFL draft, he was eventually content to settle into less ostentatious vocations. A *Sales Associate* at the Chrysler dealership topped his list of obtainable dream jobs; working for Mr. D was some place at the bottom. And although Eric would be considered a good-looking guy by classical standards: tallish, strong chin, Roman nose and dark curly hair who could talk the talk (a real bullshit artist in the making), being only eighteen he was a bit young for career opportunity numero uno. Years after, well after Maggie-D would leave him and Pothole, his employment application would be retrieved from the bottom drawer of a desk by the Chrysler dealership's bookkeeper/personnel manager, and he'd be allowed to trade in his orange and white NAPA shirt for a sports coat, necktie and nugget jewelry.

Eric was outstanding at gaining the middle ground.

Four months after her courtship with Eric, near the end of her junior year at Pothole High School, 1986, young Miss Duffy lost her less-than-coveted virginity to the star running back.

'The boy has talent,' Maggie-D admitted to Clara, 'I suppose one doesn't watch all that porn without learning something useful.'

Yes-sir, the fruition of Maggie-D's stated future, the one hastily expressed to Clara at the park the previous summer, was well on its way to becoming so. What was worse was what Harvey had in store for her. He cleared a corner of The Store's office, procured a battleship grey metal desk from the Salvation Army and commissioned Maggie-D to her less-than-sensational future. Although genuinely honored at Harvey's trust in her ability to one day oversee his empire of motor products, snippets of what Trip (Jason) had talked about that one time at Chester's was beginning to poke its tiny head up from the earth of imagination—like some daisy you know will bloom its yellow face of sunshine and hope at any moment.

Maggie-D felt the crunch.

## SEVEN

Lunching on a baloney sandwich and a bag of Fritos with Clara across from the school's only soda machine, Maggie-D admitted to her best friend, whose mocha-tinted hands cupped a red soda pop can in pensive silence, that maybe it was time to revisit her mission in life.

'Eric has a grand notion of me and him shackin'-up atop his granny's garage apartment, now that it's been freed-up with the passing of old-man Pickles. Did you know what that old fart's first name was?'

Clara shook her head absently.

'*Percy*. I kid you not.' Maggie-D cracked-out a laugh in spite of herself. 'Anyone naming their child Percy Pickles must have been strung-out on crack cocaine way before it was fashionable. You know, it's things like that that make some people go postal on their families. Anyway, Eric thinks we should move into the place and live like Lucy and Ricky or something. It would get me outta the Duffy death grip, but I dunno if I could handle living so close to his whacky grandma. I mean, I don't mind her obsession with those afternoon cocktails of hers: codeine cough syrup with Mountain Dew, but having to listen to Bee Gees and Donna Summers all the time just won't do. That's just too weird for me. I've got plenty of weird at home, thank you very much. It's time for something, I dunno, *greater*—I suppose. Normalcy would be a nice change, not that Eric is offering any of that. Do you think Grandma Eric was doing Percy Pickles?... Are you listening to me girl?'

Clara looked away from the fenced-in Coke machine—into which two holes were woven: one for coin, one to retrieve beverage (maybe)—to her best friend. Green eyes peered under the white, knitted roll-over hat Clara'd bought for her at the Goodwill for two bucks. She stuck her pointy finger through the middle of the sandwich she had no desire to eat.

'I got myself pregnant Maggie-D.'

Silence.

'Tommy?'

Silence.

'We were careful too. "No glove, no love," I told that horny Thomas Miles whenever he came ta my house to *read lines* for his drama classes.'

Maggie-D tossed her half-eaten bag of Fritos onto the other end of the long table they were perched on and took Clara into her arms. Clara, not accustomed to emotional outbursts, cried into the soft hat of her best friend.

'I'm scared.'

Rocking back and forth with a few onlookers catching glimpses of the two, Maggie-D stroked her best friend's spongy hair.

'Don't worry my sister, everything will be okay.'

'Yeah, I know.' Clara looked up in the time it takes a lunch period bell to cycle, pulled back to wipe her wet cheeks. 'I want to be a mama. Now might be even the best time—they say seventeen is the perfect physical age. And Tommy *is* a good boy.'

Maggie-D pulled back to study her friend. The subject of an abortion now seemed moot. Clara sensed this.

'I won't be needin' to visit the Planned Parenthood or anything like that.'

'You know you don't have to have the baby if you don't want to.'

'I know. It's my body, my life. I could always have a baby later—I thought these things ta myself the last two nights. The thing is, is that it feels right ta me. My mama, you know, had me at the end of her litter—almost 40 she was—and we have nothin' ta say ta one another. When my little girl is old enough to be interested in boys, I'll at least not be so old where I won't be able to give her advice from a *young woman's* perspective. I'll still have my whole life ahead of me too, ya know?'

'Yea, this is a good day then.' Maggie-D gave her best friend a thumbs-up. 'So, those were tears of celebration.'

Smiling evenly, Clara who still held Maggie's hands in hers, squeezed hard. 'Tears of fear for the whole new life ahead of me; tears of fear for you my best friend.'

'Huh?'

‘The thought of you plugged into Pothole for the rest of our sorry-ass lives makes me sick. You talkin’ about shackin’ with anybody from Pothole makes me want ta slap the white right offa-ya.’

‘Oh,’ a short hiccup sound escaped Clara’s friend’s unprepared lips.

‘You just look at all the sadness around ya and then feel responsible for it, like if ya were to go do your own thing for a change ya’d be abandonin’ somethin’. People come to Pothole, like my daddy and mama `cause they ave no choice. Your folks too. You’ve done your time here my sister. Now go shine some other place.’

Maggie-D met this loving admonishment with only a silent swinging of dangled legs from the table top.

Maggie-D knew what Clara had been getting at, sort of. Not that it had been a pressing issue in that carefree world she lived in, but the absence of any real challenge was certainly a river that would, someday, need to be crossed.

‘What about school darlin’?’ Maggie-D turned the conversation back to the original crisis at hand. ‘Bumpin’ around in the halls just won’t do for the high-minded ones here.’

‘I need to prepare the nest anyway. I’ll finish up school later, I suppose. I want Thomas to continue on. He has a future—we’ll need that, ya know?’

Maggie-D knew.

EIGHT

June 10, '86

Dear Eric,

Sorry, but I'm going to have to pass on your offer of co-habitation. You are a fine human being, with a very nice behind to match. I think there's a lot for you to still do in this town, but I need to fly solo. Know what I mean? I don't know where I'm going yet, but maybe I'll send you a postcard or something when I get there.

Now you be good.

Regretfully yours,  
Maggie-D

June 10, '86

Dear Harvey and Priscilla (and you too Brad),

I don't know how to tell you this, which is why I've left this letter on the ice box like I have, but I fear that I have nothing left to offer you all. I love you all dearly, you know that, but my time in Pothole is simply up. So, don't go calling the cops or anything stupid like that. Running a parts store just wasn't on the Maggie-D radar—neither was squeezing out babies atop of some garage. Now that 11<sup>th</sup> grade is gone and summer is smiling, it's just, well, time to fly!

I'll write you all when I get to where I'm going.

Love,  
Maggie Anne

P.S. I cashed in those savings bonds Granny Duffy left me, so I'm flush until I get a job or something. You now know I'll be fine. And, hey Brad, please be nice to Charlie and feed him when he's hungry. Okay?

*Hi there!*

*... You are my inspiration, my history. There's too much love and sorrow in my heart today, so I can't say what it is that might need to be said at a time like this. You hear my voice on this tape don't you, its coming completely apart... But, my sister, close your eyes right now. Do you see me putting my hands on your shoulders and yours on mine? We're looking into the windows of our lives-to-be through the dreams and hopes we have for each other. I see your eyes shining with a mission of motherhood, sharing a new life with a good young man who won't let you down. You see in my eyes courage that came from you. God is on our side...Damn, I didn't want to blubber like this! Anyway, if I make it all the way to L.A., I'll look up your aunt like you said.*

*I love you Clara.*

*Your best friend always,  
Maggie-D*

## NINE

Shadowed under one of those floppy hats that seem so popular with the folks who hang out in jungles, and with a big sunflower poking its bright yellow head out of the orange backpack sitting next to her, a girl is holding a guidebook of the Western USA. Its typeface is definitely not English.

*Hey, that chickie's reading in the wrong direction,* nudged Maggie-D to herself. She was leaning against a peeling white plaster wall, sipping a can of ice tea she rushed to purchase at the depot's *Snack Central* (a bank of abused vending machines) after six hours of air conditionedless transport. She had no desire to get on yet another bus so soon. And, with no one in Prescott, Arizona's Greyhound bus depot but two kids on skateboards and the backward book reader concealed in khaki, it was easy for Maggie-D to decide on her next friend.

'Hi there. Whatcha reading?'

'Oh. Hello,' beamed the girl at least a few years older than the willowy teenager standing before her. The tourist quickly unfolded the legs that had steadied her book, stood up and gave a curt little bow to the American. 'Please to meet you.' Yuuki, offered her hand and Maggie-D shook it gladly.

'My friends call me Maggie-D.'

Yuuki Satoshi asked to be called *Iris*, said she liked the sound "Maggie-D" and asked if there was meaning behind the name.

'Oh, yes: venerable daughter of parts store owner.'

Smiling her understanding of American sarcasm, Iris offered a place on her fifteen-foot wooden waiting-area bench with a hand's gesture. Now, slunked into place like duel sacks of rice, the two continued.

'And yours?'

'Yuuki or Iris?' retuned the foreigner.

'*Iris*, that's like in the flower, right?'

Yes, triple-nodded the Japanese.

'Then Yuuki. What's that all about?'

In Japan, *yu* means courage; *ki*, means spirit, explained Iris.

'So, *courageous spirit?*' offered the American.

Another session of nods followed. 'I'm fifth child: four brothers, no sisters. Father was pretty clever, yes?'

A baggy-pants flap away from where the girls had pulled their knees up before them on their wooden seat, the two skateboarding boys swooshed their way to the soda pop machine. Pausing only long enough to acknowledge the proximity of the two boys' excessive energy, Maggie-D turned her head back to Iris to comment on her *damn good* English.

'Five years of English study in Japan; one year with American host family as exchange student. I am graduate of Union High, San Diego. Go Surf Dawgs! Plus four years study at UC San Diego. And thank you very much, but my English is still a little *foreign*.'

Maggie-D gave a slight tilt of the head, acquiesced with a squint of a smile.

'This is not where you live, no?' An observation which was perfectly logical to the Japanese visitor since neither of them had yet to bolt out to the hot, lightly trafficked street as had the other five passengers deposited at the old, so-called historic, former train station.

'Nope. Never been here before,' she said anxiously. 'I've never really been anywhere before. I just escaped from Pothole—that's in Ohio. I'm on my way to L.A. This town looked kinda nice from the Greyhound's window, so here I am.'

'You like *el-aye*?' wondered the tourist. She'd be passing through that way too.

'I think it'll be okay,' hoped the runaway. My best friend's aunt lives there, which is a start. 'It has an ocean! Whenever I see a movie with that big stretch of water and sky, I think how totally bitchin' it must feel to stand at the end of a road and look out into limitlessness. Know what I mean?' The Japanese traveler nodded. She too was heading for the coast where beyond it was an ocean that bridged their two ways of life. 'Anyway, tonight, I'll settle for a cheap motel or something.'

With attention drawn to her travel guide, the visitor from 5,500 miles away (as the seagulls fly) pointed-out with forefinger to pulp that, supposedly, there was a youth hostel nearby—a lodging option completely foreign to Maggie-D.

'Youth hotel?' Maggie-D questioned over the din of the noise that came from Snack Central.

'Naaw, youth *hostel*,' shouted Yuuki Satoshi of Japan. 'Cheaper—bed only.'

The noise from the boys was swiftly turning into a distraction that required some attention. Maggie-D was pretty sure she'd heard some cat-calls coming from the direction of the soda machines. She'd been ignoring it—up until the little orange-haired one, the one who sported baggy surfer shorts and sunglasses too big for his lightly-freckled face, pestered on with his routine: the kind of whistling generally associated with cartoon characters. You know the sound. That of the construction workers leering over a woman's exaggerated form, no doubt, is where he'd learned it. Anyway, rowdy juvenile behavior was nothing new to this runaway. Even so, Maggie-D squinted tightly at them.

'Maybe the hostel has space, yes?' encouraged Iris who was also becoming a little ill-at-ease with the kiddies.

Maggie-D gave a thumbs-up.

The boys gave their thumbs-up too—more spirited if not spitefully. One of them produced a pecking noise.

'Maybe misguided youths would like knuckle sandwich, yes?' Iris' eyes lit up as she proposed this to her new friend.

'Kids. What can you do?' Maggie-D said this more cheerfully than sardonically as she collected her little backpack and shoulder bag.

The two girls left the cover of the bus depot's inhospitality for the Sheldon Street exit. At the door, Maggie-D spun a one-eighty on her heels. The boys froze in place at the presence of this bigger girl, now within biting range. Iris kept a respectful five-skateboard-length distance away from the private matter.

'Hello there gentleman. Is there something we can help you with?'

Those poor, early pubescent toads obviously hadn't planned on an actual pay-off from their bad manners. The boys traded confused looks. Then the slightly taller boy—the one with long black hair who still didn't quite reach Maggie's nose—flushed to the color of his daddy's Marlboro pinned between his ear and turned-up *Metallica* cap. His dumb grin and

shake of head was answer enough. The littler one, the one still trying to grow into the pants of the street-wise teenager he was not, sought to avert the punishment of being caught off-guard. Pulling fake Oakley shades down to the last freckle of his button nose (this child *must* have a movie poster of *Risky Business* pinned to his wall, thought Maggie-D), he tested Maggie-D with a crotch-to-chest once-over—while grabbing his unit, big eye teeth resting on his lower lip.

The attempt at bravado, however admirable thought Maggie-D, still needed polishing. Then as instinctual as jiggling a leaking toilet's handle, she took hold of the situation at hand—if only for the sake of, you know, sisterhood.

'Okay sunshine, let's go.'

Tugging lightly at the confused boy's moist wrist, Maggie-D steered the rude little prick down the hallway that led from the depot's side entrance. Tailing the two was Iris; behind her was the grinning boy in thrashed jeans. Inside the once white-tiled room that read: "Ladies W.C. (please keep clean)" Maggie-D asked Iris if she would hold her bags—this while she began pulling her blue sleeveless Tee over her head.

'Wwwhat are you doing?' The boy's color had all but abandoned him, leaving brilliant freckles and a small round mouth to plead for leniency.

'We're going to get busy lover-boy; you and me, right here in front of your friend. You know, so there's a witness. You can *do me* over this sink, okay?'

The friend's jaw dropped open. Iris barked a laugh into cupped hand.

'I'm kind of sweaty after all those hours on *the Hound*,' said the defiler, 'but since I'm sure this is your first time you probably won't mind the smell. *Iris darling*,' said she as she wrestled with the third button of her denim's nearly unbuttoned fly, 'you got a spare rubber?'

'No, all out. Sowry. Just *dill-dough*, and corkscrew!'

'Nuh, uh—forget this noise,' stammered the boy to Maggie's knees—every vengeful bitch slasher flick he'd ever seen buzzing through his head like a chainsaw on urethane wheels. The little monkey-spanker

had bitten off more than his life experience could chew. Making a beeline for the door, he abandoned his signature glasses which fell to the paper towel strewn floor.

'Wait up honey-bunny,' Maggie-D called out gently, now carefully affixing the sunglasses back onto the boy's ashen face once outside the W.C.'s door. 'Teasing can be fun, but, ya know, it can be humiliating too. Make it playful—be yourself, and when the right time *and person* comes around, both will be the happier for it. Know what I mean?'

Maggie-D kissed the top of little boy's head paternally. Iris gave him a sisterly pat on his little behind and gruffly whispered (with Betty Davis voice), 'Now run along little boy before *I* eat you.'

Maggie-D wagged an accusatory finger at Iris' shoulder bag as they spilled onto the vengeful heat of Sheldon Street with their packs and hats in hand. 'You really have a corkscrew in there?'

It was Iris' turn to blush.

## TEN

It was in Costa Rica, in the waning days of summer, 1985, that Trip zeroed-in on New Zealand for his next adventure. This decision was cemented with the French sinking the now-famous Rainbow Warrior in Auckland's harbor the year before, an act of cowardice that killed a crew member of that Greenpeace ship.

'Oh, just beautiful,' Trip had vented to his then girlfriend, Zil ("short for Elizabeth—backwards", she'd say with the same conviction as a mouthwash commercial). 'The Kiwi's survived my country's wrath for declaring themselves a Nuclear Free Zone, only to have French guerillas attack a pacifist ideal...'

But Zil was not into Trip's political trips. As a cinematography arts major, she could discern a movie to be truly "camp." (A seemingly bad film that unwittingly touches on the sublime and is therefore relabeled as ironic and worthy of cult following—as opposed to just another idiotic, low-budget flick) She just couldn't separate social responsibility from something just being "lame." She liked Trip's globe-trotting, radical persona, or thought she did after several of those lime with rum drinks she could never remember the name of that Trip would make her every night. She just thought deep down that "the Good Samaritan thing" was, simply, a downer.

What Zil and Trip *could* agree on during those two months together on that beach was that they found one another attractive, her with waist-long blonde hair and small piercing on her left nostril, and Trip for having the balls to wear *only* a sarong (ala commando) behind the bar. Also going for them was that they were both young, ping-pong off the bamboo walls with sexual energy, tolerant of one another's value system—if only until fall when they would split up in Orlando where she held out for a job with the Disney syndicate and "nature guy" hitched to L.A. for *meaningful* work.

Yep, New Zealand would soon be had for this nomadic Alaskan—that is, as soon as he raised sufficient USDs for the trip—hence, the side trip to L.A.

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Trip handed back the job summary sheet to Jeff, the project's lead organizer. "This is the kind of gig I can run with," assured Trip a year after he'd had his jollies in Central America. The "lead organizer" shunned titles such as "executive director" or "supervisor" just as he did traditional office working attire—something Trip could respect. Jeff's frayed, once-white, corduroy shorts and FLAN (Feed L.A. Now!) T-shirt certainly confirmed a penchant for hardcore activism. It also spoke of how Jeff couldn't be bothered with the whole "image thing," although his meticulous rejection of it was, in itself, a style (slash) fashion—or, so reasoned the applicant.

This thin late 20's white guy with a beatnik goatee and Clark Kent glasses, who sat behind a particleboard folding table cluttered with remnants of the previous night's bulk mailing was equally impressed with the résumé Jason Mays had unfolded from his backpack. Trip was no stranger to door-to-door canvassing or to charity work. The classified ad for a Canvassing Captain which Jeff had posted in the *L.A. Reader* for two weeks had produced, to date, two responses—neither of which possessed actual experience. Jeff freely admitted this to Jason Mays.

'...And here you show up, just like that, with everything I'd put on my shopping list: canvassing, telemarketing, outreach coordination, *and* you can use a computer. You seem like a pretty righteous dude. So if sixteen hundred a month is cool with you, I can get you working the volunteers this time mañana.'

It was cool with Trip—very cool—and that easy. It always was with these kinds of jobs, which was how Trip liked living. FLAN was riding the current social trend, or "*cause dejour*" as he'd put it, of world hunger—but with a totally local bent. Sure, billions of people were going to bed ("bed," of course, being relative) hungry every night in Asia and Africa, but so were tens of thousands of folks in mega-rich Los Angeles. It was an issue this bleeding-heart wanderer could get totally into. It was urgent and it was righteous. The job was budgeted for its duration (through the end of November, '86), and Trip would find out at the end of that "formal" interview that there was an available room with his name on it. And it was

right there at that dilapidated, circa 1920, Victorian-styled six-bedroom house on Russell Street.

‘We all just chip-in for food and take turns tidying up the joint. Room’s there for you if you want it,’ offered Jeff, although he himself rarely stayed there anymore. And not having to spend nearly half his wages on L.A.’s legendarily over-priced apartment rentals meant that Trip could be back traipsing the rest of the starving world (after a sufficient period of decadence in New Zealand that is) by end-of-the-year—max.

Immediately after the tête-à-tête with his new boss, Trip spent the rest of that Monday at “Travel Eddie’s,” a bookstore in Santa Monica that fed pages and pages of far-off lands to wander junkies like Jason Mays.

## ELEVEN

On the 21st of July, 1986, two bouncy explorers of life celebrated seventeen years of Maggie-D-ness by arriving in the City of Angels with all the anticipation and awe—if not trepidations—of the next young traveler or runaway. With backpack on and new friend at her elbow, the white girl with Indian ball cap rummaged through her faded-denim jean purse (something she'd created out of an old pair of Levi's and a belt in her tedious home-ec class the previous semester). Needless to say, she and her Japanese travel pal did seem a bit obvious standing there on Temple Street between Rampart Boulevard and Alvarado. It was at this unremarkable spot that they paused in their L.A. foot journey so Maggie-D could find her written directions. They'd just passed a little wooden burger stand that claimed to be "world famous." *Yeah, I'm sure*, they had thought simultaneously.

'Ah, I found the little fucker,' announced Maggie-D as she lifted a small piece of paper from her bag. This didn't mean that they were any less lost than before. She circled once, zeroing-in her sights on a means for information like a pigeon to a French fry.

'Excuse me! Hi-ya!'

Maggie-D introduced herself with a fierce wave to a balding black man painting over graffiti on the Temple Street side of Al's *Not So World Famous* Hot Dogs, Fried Chicken -N- Waffles.

The owner, Al ("Stick"), dropped his brush onto the lid of the paint can that was near empty, drained the last ounces of the quart bottle of Miller Draft, and without turning his head to the distraction, replied:

'Excuse what?'

'Hi. Sorry to bug ya, but could you tell us if Fourth Street is this way?' Maggie-D, with Auto Club map in hand, pointed in a southerly direction. The man finally rotated his attention their way.

'She-it,' he replied, shaking his head. Yep, he'd seen it all now.

The girls stood their ground, smiling, waiting under hats of non-regional design.

‘That way babe.’ He pointed northeast with the neck of his clear glass bottle. ‘But you might be need-in a visitor’s pass to walk on through.’ Stick laughed fiercely at Maggie-D’s confused squint. ‘Well, maybe not babe. You’z obviously *non-combatants*. Homeboys here will be so shocked ta see such whiteness, they’ll probably wave you through thinkin’ it’z a pol-leece set-up or somethin’. Ha!’

‘Well, that’s good, right? Mucho thanks,’ thanked the taller girl—the two now pointing their sights and tired feet up Temple Street. ‘We’ll come back one day soon for some of your breakfast waffles or something—you can count on it!’ Maggie-D shouted back.

The man shook his head and dipped his brush.

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The duplex at 1625-B 4<sup>th</sup> St. was on a small, littered, loud—not just visually either—residential street that dead-ended along the side of a less-than-attractive wave of concrete that held a chunk of Interstate 10. Just about every house on that and surrounding streets had no less than a chain link fence to denote its absolute territory. Most had adorned iron bars on the windows, threatening trespassers with either getting their fool heads blown off or their asses chewed off. But not Pearl Johnson. She wasn’t about to be imprisoned in her own home, no sir. Planters of exotic cactus on her windows’ sills and a decal warning “Community Watch Program”—one as inactive as the participants—were security enough. The small picket fence that was there when Pearl first leased the place, however, stayed. The “old woman” next door to her who shared her yard found it comforting.

Passing the waist high, unlocked, security perimeter, the girls rapped on the heavy wood door with the meaty part of their small fists. They found the exercise worthy of mutual giggles.

‘You must be Miss Duffy?’ correctly assumed the occupant in the time it took for the color to return to the girls’ right hands.

‘I am indeed. But, you can call me Maggie, or Maggie-D like my friends do. This to my right,’ addressing her new friend with game-show elegance, ‘is my traveling companion, Iris. She’s from *Japan*.’

Yuuki Satoshi was pleased to meet Pearl and bowed the distance of the lady’s second-to-top blouse button to testify to that fact.

‘And I’m very pleased to meet you both. You girls just step on in from the heat. I’m just finishing up a telephone call.’

‘...Martha, I have to go. A white girl *and* an oriental just appeared on my door step. Bye now.’ And Clara’s Aunt Pearl was back to the picture-frames-and-flower-patterned-wallpaper adorned hallway before the house’s two Persian cats could sniff their visitors.

Aunt Pearl, who could have easily been Grandma Pearl, took in the two as if they were her own sons returning from college. Clara, the old lady’s favorite niece who had talked up her friend on occasions too-*numerous-to-count*, had alerted her Aunt Pearl of her best friend’s proximity. This tripped an “Oh, yes, I remember youuu now,” from aunt Pearl. ‘And look at you now. Last time I saw you, you were just this high,’ Aunt Pearl’s hand stopped at her strong belly. ‘But you wouldn’t remember that, would you?’

Maggie-D couldn’t, of course, but she was happy enough that Aunt Pearl had remembered. It meant she was beside a familiar face.

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There were picking opportunities in the Golden State’s celebrated wine country and Yuuki Satoshi was on to it like aphids to a grape leaf—meaning that she could stay only for that first week at the duplex on 4<sup>th</sup> Street. The following Saturday, they had goodbye waffles at Al’s.

‘Dear god, it’s you two again. You’re not here to hold me up?’ Stick laughed his way into a wet cough as he set his three plastic yard chairs out under the rusted steel umbrella that had seen better days.

“What-will-it-be?” The two early-risers opted for waffles only. Neither could imagine having chicken *and* waffles. They had a couple of diet colas to wash it down—being that Stick hated coffee and wouldn’t serve what he didn’t like.

‘So, why are you called Stick?’ asked the waffle-nibbling Maggie-D after hearing another Pepsi customer call him by name.

‘‘Cause I got a big stick that I beat pesky customers with who keep akskin’ questions so early in the god-damn mornin’.’

The girls threw surprised looks at each other, mouths agape with waffle chew. Then they panned back to the sarcastic short-order cook with stubble facial hair.

'I'm just kidding, Babe. It's just a nickname, something that stuck. You gotta name?' he pointed with a pair of batter-encrusted tongs.

Maggie-D introduced herself and her friend. They were on the way to the bus stop, the one that would take them to Union Station where an awaiting Amtrak coach would introduce one of them to the sweet hills of wine country. Chipping the prior day's paint from the corners of his fingernails with the tines of a fork, Stick brought out his hand to meet Iris' who thanked him for a *most interesting* breakfast.

'I have not met many black American in my travels.'

Stick responded with a *is-that-so* bob of the head.

'Not like the Hollywood movies at all. *Kon-eche wha*,' Iris greeted.

Maggie-D, riding the humor of Iris' innocent observation, poked her red and white striped drinking straw to the direction of Stick matter-of-factly and winked. 'Ready Kung-Fu Girl?'

Then with a thumbs-up from Iris who burped nonchalantly and tossed her cup into the trash barrel like an NBA pro, Maggie-D and her friend, with a parting '*Arigato*', left Stick slightly bemused behind his counter.

## TWELVE

The campaign was far less flashy and ambitious than the event getting so much of that season's media attention, the one attempting to link hands the entire stretch of the lower 48 States, yet it was certainly more practical. By placing a Citizen Initiative on the November '86 election ballot, the good and righteous people of Los Angeles County could now choose to increase sales tax by one-half cent, ear-marked for the task of feeding and caring for the city's 40,000-plus nightly homeless and unaccounted-for-others who just weren't getting by on the "trickle down economics" of the Reagan presidency. It was now July 27<sup>th</sup>, and with the election nearly four months away, Trip was riding as high as an Alaskan sled dog in heat.

'...And four months from now,' he'd needle Jeff, 'I'll be putting another shrimp on the bar-bee in your memory.' Jeff always laughed it up when he heard that tired line, and not just because Trip had intentionally confused Aussie tourism commercials with the Kiwi's. (They too put shrimps on barbeques. But they just didn't make a big deal about it—not to say New Zealanders made a big deal out of anything, except, perhaps, sheep.)

A successful outcome was all-but-assured according to the *Times'* recent polling. And this was due, in no small part, to FLAN's nomadic volunteer coordinator's management skills. Take, for instance, "V-Night." Every-other Saturday night, Trip would host a campaign-paid-for barbeque social for his volunteers. He served cold beer and exotic drinks behind an improvised beach bar (bamboo strips nailed over stacked lettuce crates) in the sarong he'd all but lived in while bartending in Costa Rica.

'Put another shrimp on the bar-bee,' Jeff shouted from his lounge chair. (This, while his friend was pouring beer into sixteen-ounce paper cups or stoking the elaborate barbeque spread of seafood, chicken and kabobs of vegetables with pineapple chunks.)

'So, dude. You going to miss it here?' Jeff was feeling pretty light, third-light-beer light, which was a good place for him. He liked V-Night because he didn't have to do anything—which was the point of it. No speeches, no donor schmoozing, no politics.

After Trip established that Jeff was not alluding to L.A. being “missed,” and that his employer already knew how comfortable he felt about the campaign, he narrowed it down to the Victorian style home he’d been sheltered in. He started to get the feeling that it might be a loaded question.

‘The casa has a good vibe; she’s been pretty alright.’

‘And—you and *Henny* getting along alright?’

‘Ah.’

Henny, age 53, also lived in that six-bedroom house on Russell Street. Though not a staffer, she’d help out now and again in the office downstairs—not that she was encouraged to. Months earlier, one of the campaign’s senior committee members had found Henny living in a tripleply (Whirlpool quality) cardboard box near her home in Silver Lake district, and sort of took her in. Not into her home, heavens no, but to the Russell Street house where there was always an extra room a good ten miles from that committee member’s neighborhood and where there was a compassionate housemate to restock the refrigerator.

Trip met Jeff’s eyes and nodded pleasantly.

Jeff knew that response.

‘You know she used to be an actress?’ Trip knew that. ‘A not-too-famous one, but Simone and I saw her in an old Frankie and Annette beach flick. She was a babe.’

Trip saw that as a possibility.

‘You know, if she ever bothers you, you just need to be direct with her. She’ll sulk for awhile, but then forget and be good for a few days.’

‘Right, thanks for that pointer, buddy.’

Trip already knew that, however. The very afternoon that Trip Mays was hired onto the campaign and moved his precious few belongings—a forty-liter capacity backpack and small nylon duffle bag—into his new abode (a little alcove that was once part of the attic twelve steps up from the second floor), he laid down on the single twin bed and welcomed the sun’s warmth through the room’s only window. It lulled him into siesta. Unknown minutes later, a new sensation of warmth flooded his consciousness—

which only the presence of a female body straddled upon the button fly of his Levi's could produce.

'You're a strapping, good-looking man.' Henny had introduced herself when Trip's eyes opened in controlled alarm. 'I live next door. Call me Henny.'

'Why are you on me?'

'You just looked so delicious there, like a man who might need some *afternoon* delight. I bet you were dreamin' about a woman, about luuv.'

Henny's heavily made-up face came dangerously close as she gripped the worn wooden headboard of Trip's bed, her tongue wiggling wildly like a pervert who waves his penis at schoolyard children. Yes, in fact, Jason had been dreaming about a woman, but it certainly wasn't this late-aged loon in poodle haircut and wild mascara. Jason, had encountered many *delicate* situations in his young life already: a knife pointed at his chest in San Francisco while the thief availed himself of Trip's payday-stuffed wallet, and a visiting bear to his tent one night near his home in Moose Creek were just two such instances. But those—after lightning assessment of the situation—paled in comparison to this quickly approaching wagging tongue.

'Get the hell off of me please.' He used his two free hands to keep the encroaching face and tongue from licking anything more than his palms.

'Well, you don't have to be such a spoilsport,' said she as she adjusted the seat of her lime-green stretch pants. Okay, I'm going, mister. And before you can have some of me again, you'll have some makin'-up to do first.' And out she went.

Trip didn't find it necessary to share this episode with his friend who peered quizzically over from his right shoulder.

'Henny and I have an *understanding*.' Trip left it at that.

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Having made a solemn promise to herself not to be a burden to Clara's Aunt Pearl, this newbie Angelino's resolute feet pounded the hot city pavement the very same day she hugged Iris goodbye at Union Station. The

*Times*' classified pages offered little help for an under-aged teenage drop-out runaway, so she headed back to the only source of information she new in the city with a population near that of her home state.

'Mr. Stick. I'm looking for a job. Can I waitress for you?'

Stick smiled an endearing smile—one usually reserved for idiots who asked him for *Dijon* mustard on their hot dogs.

'You see a long line wrapped around the corner to Al's—like that *Wor-old Fa-mous* hamburger stand down the street?' Stick pointed a raw wiener in the direction of Beverly Boulevard. 'You don't, do ya? I barely got enough customers to keep the Pepsi people from takin' back their machine, and just enough to keep me from being bored to death.'

'Oh, yeah, right.' Maggie-D stood peering down the streets in hopes of another inspiration. 'You think that that world famous hamburger stand down there could use another set of hands?'

Stick advised her that if she relished the idea of going home every night smelling like relish, onion-laden greasy chili burgers, and didn't mind ducking drunks, perverts, junkies, hookers, wanna-be actors and other less-than-desirable city scum, and could survive on less than minimum wage, then they probably wouldn't mind having her.

Maggie-D took the man's sarcasm in the spirit it was intended and smiled. 'This sure ain't Pothole.'

'Pothole? You from O-hi-o?' teased Stick, pointing his wiener at his young customer.

'Fuckin' aye, nobody knows Pothole. Yep, that's where I hail from. So you know Pothole?'

'Sure, babe, just make a bad turn off the interstate leaving Akron and if you get lost enough before finding Cleveland, another shit-hole, you get stranded in Pothole. You poor thing.'

'Some actually like it there,' she defended with a laugh.

'Some people like being pissed on too.'

Maggie-D shook her head sourly.

'But, hey, if you really need ta work, you can go try that tort-tee-lia factory three streets over. Don't know anythin' about the place, other than

they hire a lot of help from *Thai-land*. Some of the girls come here for lunch—when they can afford ta. *Ha.*'

Rejuvenated with Duffy resolve, and not being one to waste a day, Maggie-D marched on to Aunt Pearl's for a shower and change into proper clothes and then straight over to Star Tortilla and Bagel on Alvarado Street.

The entryway served as the general waiting room, with only a cut-out window for the receptionist to tell people to "have a seat" on the mismatched sofa or two chrome chairs that sat unused under the harsh fluorescent light fixture above. A dog-eared poster of a couple dozen bagel options was taped to one of the yeast colored walls: plain, onion, garlic, poppy seed, sesame seed, ending with one called "The Everything." The factory owner, a Mrs. Pine—a robust woman in her late forties—met with Maggie-D personally. She was on her way out the door and, being the multi-task oriented manager she was, took the completed application from the black plastic in-basket ignored at the reception window and studied it.

'Hello Ms. Duffy,' Mrs. Pine didn't bother to introduce herself, 'Your application states that your work experience is limited to a month's *counter work* at A&W Root Beer...' The reader commented under her breath, *they still have those?* '...and at an auto parts store. You know anything about making bagels?'

Maggie-D owned-up that she'd never even tried one. Anticipating the owner's next question, she did cop to having eaten at a Taco Bell. Tortillas she knew and liked very much.

'Right. I gotta ask then, why do you want to work here, huh? Where's your family?'

Telling Mrs. Pine the whole story, Maggie-D knew, would only torture the poor woman. And having watched young men get mistreated by her father as they interviewed for open slots at The Store, she knew the importance of quick, easy-to-digest, answers.

'It was time to leave home. I'm on my own, and I need to pay my way now.'

Flicking her long, painted forefinger at the application, Mrs. Pine said nothing.

'I'm dependable...' the young applicant squeezed in with a last-second squint.

'I imagine you have a green card, and social security number?'

'I do have a social security card. I'm an American. Born and raised in Pothole, Ohio.'

With another two flicks of forefinger to application came a, 'Sorry; No.'

'Oh. Okay.' A little flushed by the sudden finality of her first-ever interview, Maggie-D was trying hard to maintain a brave face, although her heart had taken the verdict personally. This wasn't the first time she'd hit the wall of rejection in her blossoming life. She'd been misunderstood, ignored and rejected her fair share by the mean kids at all three levels of Pothole schools. Her parents would pull on the threads of her dignity as well: Harvey with his "get yourself a man with a good job `cause a carrot-top like yourself with no tits ain't going to be first pickin's," or Priscilla's maternal advice of "just be happy with what you can get and you won't be disappointed later." With all of them, perhaps for reasons of self-preservation, or the ability to see more clearly than most, she preferred taking the high road.

'I suppose it just wasn't meant to be then. Thank you for your time anyway, and good luck with your bagels. They smell real yummy!' And toward the glass door and awaiting pavement she went.

'Hey, can you type?'

Maggie-D spun around and turned her frown, upside-down.

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After Trip squeezed the last of the limes for his Mojito cocktails and the barbeque coals were just crusty ashes, Jeff and his bartender fell into plastic lounge chairs. Over twist-off tops of post party *cervezas*, they ching-chinged their amber bottles and marveled at how the volunteers had taken charge of the clean-up leaving only the dark, unnaturally green, trash bags as evidence that there had been fifty barbeque-sauce-slurping, alcohol-downing do-gooders there just an hour ago.

'So, dude, I got to say I envy your wicked lifestyle,' Jeff offered under origami cranes and strings of tiny colored lights that draped the backyard of the Russell Street house. Jason asked the guy in the black Malcolm X tank top how so. Jeff, now on his fourth beer, said it was because he'd always wanted to up-and-go to some next adventure like his sober bartender to his left.

'You should do it,' replied Trip, rather mechanically.

The vision of long train rides on the Trans Siberian Express, elephant safaris through the Serengeti, siestas under olive trees, were titillating, but Jeff conceded that he had too many things going on. He and his partner—life partner first, business partner second—having both grown up in central L.A., felt comfortably anchored there in the sludge of humanities eccentric side.

'Simone and I have this little gallery on Melrose. You know the place, near that thrift store where you buy your clothes: *Second Hand Slut*. And, well, the gallery means a lot to us.'

Trip scanned his memory. Nothing.

'It's called, *Gallery Walleye*,' assisted Jeff.

'The place with no name, but there's an eyeball above the front window pushing out of the stucco?'

Jeff raised his beer in the affirmative.

The gallery was Jeff's boyfriend's idea: a "co-op where struggling immigrant artists can express their geo-political views and enjoy cultural exchange—communicated through their medium of choice. On the weekends, *only*, between the hours of 9 p.m. and midnight, *only*, they opened up to the public. They poured cheap Chilean wine into colorful, locally blown stemware and passed a few trays around with toothpicks sticking out of cheese cubes. Art-patron wannabees deliberated over the meanings of the pieces on display, gossiped, or just gathered-up social opportunities for the coming week.

'Like, *Toast Night at Johnny's*,' Jeff trailed off.

Trip had, and rightfully so, no response whatsoever to that.

‘Johnny’s. It’s a restaurant on the west side.’ Trip maintained a polite stare. ‘You know, red Naugahyde booths, *individual* toasters on the tables...’

‘I see.’ Trip didn’t, but relented as Jeff nodded secretly.

‘Then we head-out to drop some *ex* at a rave, or maybe take in a midnight film noir on Sunset.’

Trip fully understood now. He’d heard the old “I wish I could do that, see the world” line too often to go for the bait. He used to reply, “It’s easy. I’ll show you how to do it man.” But he knew better now. Telling people that *they could*, also carried the implication that there was a cost involved—the monetary one paling in comparison to the discord that long-term travel inevitably brings to one’s fixed notions of what’s important in life. This always cornered their real anxiety, that of changing out of the familiar. Whereas Jason Mays saw change as a profound part of living, he also saw that this belief often put him in the minority—at least within the goal-driven, money-conscious set. The irony of Jeff and Simone’s gallery of internationals aside, leaving Los Angeles was scary. Jeff was the kind of guy who would take a beating or go to jail for what he believes in (and had done both), but testing out a completely different side of himself was just too forbidding.

‘Besides, Simone’s in his third year of jewelry design and then he has to really work the L.A. scene if he wants to tap into the celebrity market...We’ll steal a week off in December for a Vegas weekend or something. But, I do still envy you man.’

‘Yeah? Thanks.’ Trip gave a shoulder-hug to his stretched-out boss beside him. ‘And if it’s any consolation, boppin’ from one strange place to another, though pretty cool *most* of the time, isn’t always the glamour gig that it appears. You have a life partner to cuddle-up with every evening, and you have your political commitments. All that dishes up a little more promise to our soul-starved world than globe-trotting. You’ve got a fine sense of resolve, my friend.’

Jeff read Trip’s assessment as a gentle face-saving. Jeff countered by saying that he, Trip, could mix-it-up with the women as fiercely as he

mixed tropical cocktails. Meaning that cuddling opportunities could not possibly be in short supply for this traveling man.

‘Buddy,’ Trip laughed in confidence, ‘you may think I’m a shag-monster with the ladies, but the truth of it all is that I’ve lost the taste for short-term *encounters*. They lack something, maybe an ethereal connectedness—probably relational honesty. Maybe I’m being a prude.’ Jeff didn’t mind superficial relationships, but let it go. ‘And there really aren’t a whole lot of women out there who have the travel bug I have. I reckon they’d rather settle for a comfortable, familiar, home over new scenery and soulless rooms. Someday though I’ll have what you have—a soulmate and a place to really call home—least I hope to.’

Jeff said his friend was full of shit and thanked him for it, as the two headed for the house to their separate worlds.

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Away from the din of busy Rampart Street and the prying eyes of the Latina receptionist with two-inch sculptured nails and a distracted-at-nothing-in-particular look, Mrs. Pine led Maggie-D like a duckling through a short maze of dark wood paneling, and past two permanently empty offices. Then with a hand’s gesture she invited her to sit before a chipped wooden desk which held piles of paper that had yet to spill onto the pile below it. Mrs. Pine hollered down the hall, ‘Maria. Call *Hair Today* and tell Yolanda I’ll be twenty minutes late.’

A muted “yeah” came from the front. Mrs. Pine was already onto the new matter at hand.

‘You like kids?’

Racing through Maggie-D’s mind like a Chinese moneychanger fingering an abacus of mini bagels was how tortillas, typing, and liking kids might fit together. Sure, she loved kids. Who didn’t?

The lady factory owner said that her brother was a lawyer—actually, more like an agent, but that was not the point. She sized up her applicant one last time before saying that her agent-lawyer brother was looking for someone to work with him and the McDuffy Family.

‘Ring any bells—aside from the obvious similarity of surnames?’

A pregnant pause hovered in the air for the time it took Maggie-D to twist her smile into unfamiliarity.

‘Nope, not a clue. *Sorreey.*’

Mrs. Pine tapped her pencil to her eye teeth and blinked once.

‘You don’t stay current with the news, do you?’

Maggie-D admitted that she would certainly like to keep abreast of world affairs, but the newspapers and television news were a little disheartening to stick with. ‘You know, with the ozone layer depleting, nuclear war just waiting to turn us all into shadows, starving children in Africa, who can watch the news without wanting to cry?’

‘I see,’ said Mrs. Pine. ‘Well, the McDuffy’s have been in the news an awful lot these days because Byron and Nancy McDuffy are about to become very famous parents. She’s pregnant, *an understatement*, and is about to drop eight more of God’s little wonders onto the world.’ Mrs. Pine dispensed with any hint of excitement. ‘They’re my brother’s new project, and he’s asked me to keep my eye out for a possible assistant—as if I didn’t have enough to do already.’ But, the girl did have a quality about her—or so thought Ms. Pine (who would happily like to move this matter back to her brother’s office where it belonged). You interested?’

*Does a stork shit in the woods?* ‘Yeah, big time.’

The applicant tapped her toes happily.

END OF SAMPLE. For obtain a complete printed copy of the novel, please visit [www.SidestepProductions.com/books/pothole](http://www.SidestepProductions.com/books/pothole).

THANKS FOR READING THIS FAR.

-Richard Hamel