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MARKHAM STARR

OR GLORY

a short story by KARL TARO GREENFELD

We went deeper into the ocean, cold water wrapping us, white foam clinging to our skin. I carried your soft, floppy body, your sweaty cheek resting against my shoulder, your right eye — the good one — wide and staring up at my face. I felt my way along the sandy bottom, trying to

step lightly where there were stones, until finally, struggling with your weight, I began to kick so that we were both floating, heads bobbing above the waterline, beyond the waves to where the water grayed and frigid sea pulled at us.

“W-w-w-we’re swimming?” you asked, suddenly afraid.

Close your eyes, Sister, I told you. Just float.

I couldn’t understand the great hurry: Why, as the semester was ending, was there suddenly this rush to leave campus? Where was everyone going? What were they so looking forward to? I dawdled until the last possible minute — later even, so that the buildings-and-grounds staff had to bang on my door the morning after the official end of term and order me to vacate. I did, my clothes stuffed into Hefty bags.

Our parents were in Mexico. They had sent me money for a plane ticket back to Los Angeles, but I had spent it on a week’s supply of booze and drugs. Now I was stuck in New York City with no place to stay. Fortunately my friend Brendan’s father was in town and offered to put me up in a hotel room and then fly me back to Los Angeles with Brendan and him. I assured him, despite his disinterest in the subject, that my parents would pay him back. I enjoyed appearing to be the type of kid whose mother and father were so indifferent that they would take off for Mexico without caring how their son got home for the summer. The truth was precisely the opposite: Mom and Dad were horrified to find, when they did return, that I had been delivered back to Los Angeles by a total stranger. Our father drove over to Brendan’s with a check.

When I got home, Mom and Dad had already picked you up from your special camp, where you’d been while they were in Mexico. You were confined, as always, to your electric wheelchair, the seat laid back on maximum recline and a footrest custom-welded to support your legs. When I came in, you pulled your lips up and back in your version of a smile. Your fleshy face, fat from another round of medication, listed to the right. I hadn’t seen you since Christmas.

“M-m-m-m,” you stuttered as you attempted to say my name. You shook your head violently, trying to slide the headphones away from your ears. I slipped them off.

Your green eyes were alive and probing, the right eye, as always, noticeably larger than the left. Trapped by spastic diplegia, you were your usual floppy mess: your muscles hypertonic; your facial features slack and expressionless; your mild neurological and developmental impairment exacerbated by your physical shortcomings. You had trouble manipulating your tongue and lips to form words and lacked the coordination to keep your eyes moving across a page of text. Yet you were always so present, somewhere in there, an intellect churning and processing and observing. Knowing.

“How was camp?” I asked.

You smiled again. “S-s-s-swim-m-ming.”

You always liked being in the water, floating on your back in my arms.

Older than I am by two years, you had spent your life staring at me and all that I could do that you couldn’t. You loved me. Fiercely. Very few who weren’t paid to be in your company

spent much time with you, and I knew you relished my tolerant attention. You asked for little, but already, just a few feet in the front door, before I’d even set my Hefty bags down in my teenage bedroom with its Clash posters, I felt the weight of my old obligation.

The electric wheelchair had been an improvement. You now managed with stubby arms to get palm onto joystick so that you could glide forward or back, turn sideways. You could roll yourself into the den to watch television but still needed one of us to operate the cable remote with its tiny buttons. I would stand there and click through the stations until I saw your right eye suddenly widen with interest, indicating: Stop here.

I saw that eye following me through the house. Even when I was away at school, I could imagine it, like a guileless version of Sauron’s great, all-seeing pupil. During a trip to the Museum of Natural History, when I stopped at the diorama of the squid and the sperm whale, the great mammal’s single massive eye would make me think of you: that unblinking gaze. You rarely blinked, the neurons that dictated this involuntary task too often AWOL. Our mother would regularly drip in eyedrops; otherwise your eyes would dry out and turn red.

As soon as I saw you, I felt the familiar guilt at not having written you enough letters. Our mother had told me how you enjoyed having them read aloud, but as I had settled in at college, I’d written less and less until, during the second semester, I’d written only twice. Was the eye accusing me now?

“D-d-d-d-do you have a g-g-g-girlfriend?” you asked me.

I told you I wasn’t sure.

You smiled. The eye widened. “W-w-w-why not?” Already twenty-two, you were destined, I supposed, to become a thirty-, then forty-, then fifty-, then sixty-year-old virgin, if your disability didn’t result in your lungs’ forgetting how to breathe or your brain’s neglecting to tell your heart to beat. You were interested in my romantic life precisely because you could never have one of your own. So why did I withhold even these details, the particulars that I knew you enjoyed hearing?

Eventually, over the course of the summer, I would allow it to spill out. I would confide in you. But not yet, no matter how much you asked to hear it. You wanted to know, I supposed, what you were missing, but also to be reassured that you weren’t missing all that much. How could I filter the topsyturvy path of young-adult romance; the confusion over when sex becomes companionship becomes love; the truth about heartbreak? How could I boil that down, relay it, translate it? And why should I? How much did I owe you? I always struggled to answer that. Less, I knew, than our parents did. But something, always something.

Back in my room, my clothes unpacked and the Hefty bags trashed, I felt the keen disappointment of being home. I put away the wool trousers, ill-fitting blazers, and heavy-soled shoes I had taken to wearing at college. I had created this whole new persona back east — artsy, literary, a wearer of vintage clothing and wingtips — but it looked and felt ridiculous now that I was back in Pacific Palisades. This was not an artsy,

literary town. Here surfers ruled, and the wearing of bulky suit coats or dress shoes would be viewed at best with suspicion and at worst as proof that I had become a homosexual. Even more frustrating was the fact that the great social strides I had made in my new East Coast setting would not be transferable. Back home I'd revert to being the same old person I had always been. I dug out my T-shirts and shorts and resigned myself to a summer that would be, in almost every respect, thirteenth grade at Palisades High.

We drove around in the same cars, parked atop the same canyon roads, and smoked the same low-grade marijuana. A few of my friends, back from their respective universities, even took their old jobs as pizza-delivery boys or supermarket baggers. I chose instead a state of dignified poverty, supplemented by money wiped from our mother's purse.

My only flashes of my better, back-east self were the phone calls with my college friends, most of whom lived in New York and were either in the city, which seemed gritty and exciting, or at their summer homes on Long Island or Cape Cod, which sounded glamorous. I wrote clever letters to them and sent witty, homemade postcards. I was counting the days until September.

Sometimes I went skateboarding with Brendan. He would drive us to dry drainage ditches or abandoned swimming pools, and we would hurl ourselves against the various concrete surfaces with differing results. After a little practice Brendan would soon be airborne above the little lip of the pool or the edge of the ditch, his head tucked so that he seemed as compact and gracefully wound as a bow tie. I would barely manage to carve up and down one side and then another before losing my momentum and coming to a halt halfway up the transition. It appeared this would be the highlight of my summer: drinking Slurpees and riding around in Brendan's new Rabbit GTI in search of empty swimming pools, and then disappointment and humiliation and skinned knees. In the evenings I would return home and sit in the den with you, flipping through the channels and trying to ignore your gaze, fixed more on me than on the television.

You were confronting your own version of postgraduate angst. You had outgrown your special-education program, a small school for people with spastic diplegia housed in a few rooms of an Episcopal church in Brentwood. The school had informed our parents that you'd gone as far as you could there. The program, after all, included children as young as five, and your continued presence had become awkward. There was another program for the spastic, through the Westside Regional Center, but that was only a few hours a day. If no alternative program was found, you would face vast amounts of empty time.

The problem looming before our parents, of course, was what to do with you. You were a seizure risk. You still wore diapers, which had to be changed frequently, an exceedingly unpleasant task. Even with Mom around and Sylvia, a Filipina nurse who came in four days a week for five hours a day, you required enough of my attention that I never felt relaxed. There had been a scare, while I was still in high school, when

you stopped breathing for almost three minutes during a seizure, and even after the EMTs drove you to Saint John's, you continued to spasm, your eyelids fluttering, irises disappearing up under the quivering skin. Your heart stopped twice, requiring the smacking down of defibrillator pads and the rushed "Clear!" as your chest jumped and your body followed, bouncing off the hospital bed as if you'd been dropped. For once, your muscles did what they were supposed to.

I was sure you were going to die in that hospital room. And then, I thought to myself, you would finally be free.

But you were strong when perhaps you should have been weak. You recovered and hadn't had any severe seizures since starting your new medication. The worst-case scenario was that you would be placed in a state developmental facility. An institution. We had visited those places and knew what kind of care you would receive there. Our parents wouldn't do that to you. Would they?

In the past I had been able to pretend that your unconditional love for me fell within the normal range of sibling regard. Yet now, as I smeared deviled ham on soft white bread and slid the pieces into your mouth, I knew I was plainly not worth this great affection. I struggled to bear up under your scrutiny.

"T-t-t-t-tell m-me about c-c-c-college," you said when I had been home a week, and I sighed and gave you what you wanted.

A person could reinvent himself there, I explained, could transform from a high-school outcast to something of a winner: could thrive, even; could be free of all the ballast of adolescence and home. (I didn't say "family.") From the moment I'd arrived, I told you, I had entranced my classmates with my *bons mots* and devil-may-care manner, so that by the end of the term they were practically carrying me around on their shoulders. I relayed to you a story of improvising a comedy routine that I had been asked to reprise in the talent show. I told of my writing-class colleagues who begged me to read from my stories and of my award-winning entry into the campus pumpkin-carving contest. (This last item, at least, was remotely true: I had taken third prize.) And I was a member of a secret society of promising male students known as the Young Gentlemen's League.

You drank in these stories, your eye unblinking as I poured in eyedrops every few sentences.

Then I changed you into your black one-piece swimsuit: pulling the bottom up over your waterproof diaper, yanking the stretchy material up along your flabby body, and finally holding you up from your seat to maneuver the straps around your arms and over your shoulders. It was exhausting, and I stopped for a moment to catch my breath. Then I rolled your chair out the back door and over the concrete patio to the shallow end of the pool, where I picked you up, gasping for a moment at your weight, and lugged you into the water. Once we were in, I held you in my arms, like a groom carrying his bride, and we half walked, half drifted, the back of your head bobbing in the water, your good eye wide and delighted. You loved what you called "swimming" and bugged me to take you

into the pool whenever I was home. While we were walking around and around like that, I told you more about my life at college.

The girls, of course, all loved me. There was one girl in particular, Barbara Vitalli, a blonde of northern-Italian descent, wealthy, residing in a brownstone filled with fabulous Asian art on the Upper East Side. She seemed taken with me, and we passed numerous evenings together in her home, amid the statuary. Yes, I explained, my options were broadening, my future prospects — as perhaps a spy or professional raconteur of some kind — were bright.

The truth, of course, was less gilded. Yes, compared to high school, I had become more social in college. Yet I still gazed with yearning at the alpha clique, those girls and boys who ruled the campus. And even though I was attending a former women's college in which females outnumbered males two to one, I didn't have a girlfriend.

Barbara Vitalli had seemed especially unattainable. Though she and I were in the same acting workshop, I would have required the proverbial last-man-on-earth status before I had a chance with her. During class I used to stare at her: almost ghostly blond hair, light dusting of freckles, blue eyes, narrow nose. I had suspected this type of beauty existed, and now, upon finally achieving visual confirmation, I felt reassured that other great and glorious things imagined but unseen must also exist in the world. To say she was a part of any crowd would have been to insult her exalted status. She lived in the city, commuted to campus in the back of a black town car, and viewed the whole place with an air of mild contempt. She rarely bothered doing a monologue for our class, and the teacher, a middle-aged, bearded fellow, seemed too intimidated to insist.

One day after a workshop I caught up with Barbara and brazenly started a conversation about a scene we were reading. Surprised by the ease of our exchange, I walked with her to the “pub,” the little campus coffee shop and bar. It went so well we began to do this every Tuesday, chatting while she waited for her next class or until one of her upperclassmen friends would arrive, take a seat, and exclude me. She seemed to enjoy my company, yet I knew it was purely a cordial relationship of limited potential. She had a boyfriend, a wealthy Italian named Sondro. They were sometimes photographed by society magazines attending this or that gala. She was also, I had discovered, an auxiliary member of something called the “Young Gentlemen's League,” a socialite organization that threw parties in support of various causes. I was, in every way, out of this league.

When I'd learned Barbara was coming to Los Angeles at some point this summer, I had given her my number but hadn't held out much hope she would call. Anyway, the prospect of spending time with her outside of school was daunting: what could we possibly talk about if not the various other students in our acting workshop? Yet I came back from skateboarding one evening to find a message with her name and number on the dining-room table.

Calling her immediately would have indicated desperation, so I watched MTV with you for a while, telling myself that when a video repeated, I would call. It happened seventy-eight minutes later, a terrible Lionel Richie song. I dragged the phone into my room and dialed.

Barbara's parents were separated, and her father, an attorney, had moved to California two years ago. It turned out she was in Santa Monica, just a few miles from our house. I even knew exactly where, a futuristic white apartment building on the side of a cliff. It had rounded balconies that extended over the Pacific Coast Highway.

When she asked what I had been doing this summer, I tried to think of something that would sound sophisticated or interesting, but I was stumped, so I just said, “Skateboarding.”

“Cool! That's, like, so California.”

She said she wanted to meet up, claiming she didn't know very many people in Los Angeles. I was eager, of course, and suggested we hang out the next day. She told me to come over to her dad's apartment.

After I hung up, I went back to watching MTV.

“W-w-who?” you asked.

I told you it was Barbara, the girl from New York.

“Your g-g-g-girlfriend?”

I explained that “girlfriend” was a term sophisticated collegiates such as myself adopted only after much deliberation. Oh, Barbara and I were an item, I assured you, but not yet formally labeled.

“B-b-b-but if you like her . . . ?”

I explained that a man with my social prospects couldn't afford to be tied down to just one girl, even one as fantastic as Barbara Vitalli. For example, I had become a skilled cardplayer and enjoyed my evenings of poker with my fellow freshmen. (I pointed out that those wool coats and worsted trousers in my bedroom had cost a fortune, money all made with my skill as a card shark.) And I needed my freedom so that I could go out for White Castle hamburgers whenever I liked. Those excuses sounded terribly flimsy even to me, so I changed the subject to my great success on the college equestrian team, where I had become the school's leading show jumper — a skill, I patiently explained, that required more bravery than talent. Yes, while away at college, I had discovered previously unknown depths of character and creativity. I would also soon be featured in a college production of *Equus*. Who would have thought that the shy kid from high school had the balls to get up on stage and act?

I tried to assemble an outfit that would be equal parts California, which I now understood that Barbara found exotic, and New York, which I knew to be hipper, smarter, and all around better. But whenever I put on a thrift-store wool jacket or herringbone trousers, I felt ridiculous. So I pulled on a black T-shirt, the same pair of Bermuda shorts I wore when I went skating, and a pair of markered-up Vans, hoping she would appreciate the authentic subcultural vibes I was sending out.

When Brendan called to ask me about skating that day, I



WILLIAM CARTER

told him I was busy.

“Doing what?” He was eating something as he spoke.

“I have an appointment.”

I heard more chewing. “Later.”

I assumed he would simply go skateboarding by himself. I wondered if he would notice the difference.

I drove my old Mazda to Barbara’s father’s building, where one parked, strangely, on the roof, which connected via a bridge to the bluffs overlooking the Pacific Coast Highway. The lobby was actually on the top floor, and you rode the elevator down to get to the apartments.

As soon as Barbara opened the door, I could feel some sort of current from her. Something had changed between us. We

hugged, and I let my arms linger for a few seconds. We didn’t acknowledge it, but we had left the platonic zone.

Her father’s apartment was a spacious three-bedroom with a wraparound balcony that faced north toward Pacific Palisades and Malibu and west over the ocean. We sat for a while on the patio furniture, sipping from cans of cloyingly sweet iced tea. The beaches to the northwest curved up and out. I knew each of those breaks and had surfed most of them, I told Barbara. Almost beneath us was the one we called “State,” and then the right-hander we called “Jetty,” and farther down, where cars were idling, waiting for a light, was “Sunset.” It was midday, the waves already blown out by offshore breezes, so there were few surfers in the water. I told her I could probably

guess who was out there right now. (I didn't add that most of those surfers had thought I was a dick in high school.)

She told me that she barely knew Los Angeles and her plan for this summer was to learn to drive. That was so New York and adorable to me: to be twenty years old and unable to drive.

"I got my license the day I turned sixteen," I told her.

She said we should go swimming; there was a swimming pool on the ground floor — the real ground floor, not the roof where you entered. I went to get a pair of trunks from my car, and when I returned, Barbara had changed into a spectacular gray one-piece with orange straps. She was standing in front of the hall mirror, tying back her hair. Not wanting to stare, I strained to keep my gaze fixed on her face, but even then the pleasing symmetry of her features made it feel somehow a guilty pleasure.

At the pool, after we set our towels down on a chaise in the sun, I heard someone call my name and turned to see Brendan and his high-school friend Sterling treading water as if they had been waiting for me.

"What's up, dude?" Brendan said, his peroxide-blond hair slightly green from the chlorine.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

Sterling's dad also lived in the building. Brendan had come over to go to the beach, but they had made it only as far as the pool.

Barbara took a seat, and the sight of her in repose caught me off guard: those calves, those thighs, the mons beneath the gray swimsuit —

"Who are your friends?" she asked.

I introduced Brendan and Sterling, and Sterling's sister, whom I had never met, swam over and said hello.

At first I was a little perturbed at the appearance of my associates, but it turned out the additional company allowed Barbara and me to be less self-conscious as we splashed in the water. I don't understand how it happened or why it felt so natural, but at one point I was sitting on the pool steps, and I pulled her toward me. She'd been talking to Sterling's sister and had her back to me, and I wrapped my legs around her waist, so that we were pressing into each other. She kept up her end of the conversation but let me know she enjoyed this little game of capture by reaching behind her to rest her hands against my sides.

The small miracle of mutual seduction unfolded over the course of the day: in and around the swimming pool, up in the apartment, at a liquor store over on Pico that would sell to us, and then back at the apartment. Brendan, Sterling, and Sterling's sister served as witnesses and ultimately useful supporting players to our blossoming romance. I could talk to them about mutual high-school friends and who was doing what this summer, imagining how wonderfully exotic all of it seemed to Barbara.

It was so effortless it almost felt like stealing.

Even Barbara's father stayed out of our way, coming home while we were at the liquor store and leaving a note for Bar-

bara explaining that he had a dinner to attend. We returned with our champagne, beer, and vodka — Barbara had paid for all of it — and cranked up the stereo, sat out on the balcony, drank, and smoked joints. Barbara actually sat on my lap, her arm around my shoulders, while Brendan flipped through her father's record collection, struggling to come up with acceptable music. He put on the Clash album *London Calling*, and during "Death or Glory" — "Every cheap hood strikes a bargain with the world / and ends up making payments on a sofa or a girl" — Barbara and I turned to each other by the railing and exchanged an easy kiss: open-mouthed, with tongue. My life suddenly transformed so that I finally saw the whole familiar coastal nightscape: the moon high over the cliffs above Chautauqua Boulevard, the waves crashing on the beach; the cars rushing by on the PCH a few hundred feet below us, tail-lights glowing through the smog and sea mist. I finally saw it for what it was: beautiful.

Barbara said, "I never noticed what they were singing; it's like, this anti-American song."

"What?"

"This song," she said. "You know, like they hate the flag: 'Death Old Glory.'"

I shook my head. No, no, no. "Death or glory," I said.

"Oh." She smiled. "Oh. I get that."

I woke at home that night amazed at my good fortune. Things like this just didn't happen to me. Barbara would be in Los Angeles for two glorious weeks. This had turned into the summer I never wanted to end.

We slept together the next afternoon, after her driving lesson, in her father's guest bedroom. She turned out to be funny when she was relaxed, doing impersonations of Brendan and a few of our acting-workshop classmates. The only awkward point was when she took a phone call from her boyfriend, Sandro, who was in Sardinia for most of the summer. She stayed in the other room for a half-hour, and when she returned, I made it a point not to look hurt. But I was. Already.

I came home late that night, after going out for sushi with Barbara and her father. Mom had fallen asleep, and I found you sitting up in the den, still watching MTV though one eye, the small one. You were alternating, as you had been taught to do when no one was there to eyedrop you. I took the drops from the table and filled first one eye with liquid, then the other.

"D-d-d-d-date?" you asked.

I nodded. You made your gaping smile, so large and awkward because, while your mouth pulled apart, the rest of your face barely budged. It was like the grin of a jack-o'-lantern.

"F-f-f-fun?"

I told you everything. The whole two days. It was, for the first time, all true.

You seemed almost as happy as I was, and you knew it way before I did: "You l-l-l-love her."

It wasn't a question.

I sat in the passenger seat while Barbara practiced driving my car. Then we went to her father's beach club in Santa

Monica, where we fucked in a cabana. In the evenings we went to the movies or, if her dad was out, drank at the apartment and screwed on the balcony. One night we went to see the Pretenders play at the Santa Monica Civic Center, and we stood in the back, making out, virtually ignoring the show. The next evening we parked in a lot next to the Santa Monica Pier. A light mist coated the cars and houses and made everything shiny. They were filming a movie among the pylons beneath the pier, the shadowy undercarriage of the wharf lit up by the artificial light, so that actors and technicians seemed to exist in one world while Barbara and I were in another. We watched them for a few minutes, and then we walked north past the pier.

The seaward gates of the fancy houses along the beach were all locked up tight. We stopped to watch a convoy of lowriders cruise in a circle around a parking lot, as if practicing for some sort of show. The drivers, their shirts buttoned up to the necks and blue bandannas pulled low over their eyes, stared at us with unconcealed contempt, but they seemed too focused on their strange circling to bother with us. They finally pulled onto the highway and drove south.

"So what do you actually want to be?" Barbara asked me. I shrugged. "Not a grown-up."

She laughed. "No, the world doesn't need any more of those."

I barely saw our parents, returned home only to see you, to confide in you my joy but also my fears and anxieties. It couldn't last, I suspected, but you didn't understand. In your mind a romance like this couldn't be fleeting. Life was supposed to work out for me, the normal one. You assumed Barbara and I would stay together, marry, and have children. Wasn't that what normal people did? Wasn't that the great mainstream of life that you were destined to observe from a back eddy?

I never told Barbara about you. I told her I was an only child. I don't know why. Was it because I didn't want her to associate me with someone who was defective? Not that I considered you defective, but I knew how the world saw you.

The end of summer loomed. Barbara and I would be returning to college, and then what? She had never given any indication that she would leave Sondro for me. And you would still be stuck at home. Our parents continued to search for another program. We never spoke about the possibility of institutionalization in some forsaken place with no swimming pools or attendants to take you into the water. But even if our parents kept you at home or found a day program for you, it was only delaying the inevitable. They couldn't feed you, dress you, wipe you forever — could they?

Is that why you loved hearing about my summer romance? Was it a fantasy for both of us, allowing us to ward off thoughts of our poor prospects ahead?

Barbara retreated from me a few days before departing for New York. She suddenly had appointments, a lunch in Beverly Hills, a movie screening to which I wasn't invited. We stopped having sex. The day before she left, she could see me for only a few minutes in the afternoon. She said she would

meet me along the cliff near the bridge to her father's building, and we could take a walk.

A walk? I thought. *What the fuck?* But this wasn't open to negotiation. She didn't want to have sex with me today and then see her boyfriend tomorrow.

She was waiting for me by a green wooden bench. From up there I could survey the cartography of our relationship: There was the pier we had walked past that night. And over there was her father's beach club.

Her hair was tied back in a bun with two sticks like chopsticks pushed through it. A few stray wisps fell around her cheek. (My God, she was beautiful.) She wore a white blouse, tapered jeans, and loafers. On her wrist was a Cartier watch. Next to her I looked and felt like a little kid in my shorts and skateboard sneakers and Santa Monica Airlines T-shirt. It suddenly seemed preposterous that I had ever had sex with this woman.

"So, is this weird?" she asked.

I shook my head.

"We can't tell anyone when we get back. OK?" she said. "We'll just be friends."

Why did she get to decide everything? Didn't I get a vote here? But I knew that I was disenfranchised. I had tacitly agreed to this somehow on that first night we'd been together on her balcony. She had chosen me, and now she could reject me and request that I not screw up her life back at school. Not that I could, anyway, since she lived in a different world than I did.

"You don't have to worry about me," I told her.

We exchanged a sad, empty hug, and she was careful to keep her hips away from mine.

I drove home and sat with you in the den. I had promised to take you swimming, and I knew you were impatient to go. "Hey," I said, "let's go swimming for real. Let's go swimming in the ocean."

This both excited and frightened you. I sprang up and rolled you out the front door and down the concrete path to the sidewalk. I lifted you into the car and buckled you in. You protested when I left your wheelchair on the sidewalk, but I explained we wouldn't need it at the beach.

While I drove, I told you my final story about Barbara and me: how she'd told me she loved me and wanted to marry me, but I had rejected her, choosing instead to maintain my independence.

You didn't understand. Why would I ever turn down the love of a beautiful woman like Barbara?

Romance was complicated, I told you. I didn't understand it, and I certainly couldn't explain it.

I looked at you, sliding down in the seat, your head tilting forward over the shoulder strap, and I considered the scope of what you would never experience, the richness and the pain. You would miss it all.

At the parking lot of the empty stretch of beach near Life Guard Station 9, I pulled you from the car and set you down on the concrete for a moment so I could take off my shirt and shoes. Then I gathered you in my arms and began the long walk to the water. ■