

from Sabrina



Stacey Levine

We left the copper-colored wine in the fridge. Speeding on Fairfax but scarcely trying. Courage is a morally neutral attribute, by the way. My brother's courage possesses its own anemic flavor. I see him holding an ice-white vase and pouring from it silvery water.

He favors the sensations of elbow or knee wrestling, speed. See us together at the Apex, Lava Bar, Meow House, Spaceland, Rue de Spree. In his hotted-up, rewired Mini, we race the canyon's edge, a car fantasy that lasts a seed of a minute, unrolling pavement stripes of poured yellow cream.

My brother's car is a blur low to the ground. He drives the events and doesn't fear the shift or the end of the story. My body or mind sleeps at night imprinted with his face as if it were a parent's or the moon orbiting. A pink scar across his eyebrow gets tougher with time, you see. Little Chad is hardy and has a way for warding off what would be sad. Life's a game, of course he would say.

He protects me with flashing that reroutes cold water and wind. No one around him is unloved, I think. See us at Indira Junior's Pancake Barn. This summer, we scarcely have wants. He tells me: "Don't sit around waiting for men to show up." Little Chad bears me above on a gearless carpet, showing the world off to me.

My brother is always in motion, champing handfuls of bare brown Tootsie Rolls. Two years younger, but he's ageless at thirty. Now he decides to join the Coast Guard. Now he cottons onto the strangeness of that. The wee irony in it. How it fills the pillow of his smile. He wants to wear white and study the men, live on a 65-foot cutter, blow across the water on the propulsion of Rolls Royce engines. To attend the Academy, perhaps. To trespass the military world before being trespassed.

In fact, it is the Coast Guard that experiences something new. We sit in the glass-encased office. The program minimum is eight years. But maniacally, Little Chad has already signed all the forms. Now he jumps from the recruiting chair. The chair clatters over. He reaches across the desk for a folder, scattering files, ignoring any possible consequences. My brother's rebelliousness is always a disaster and I understand. I crave his breaking of the rules. Because where is it from, the social injunction to always be nice? Why is decent behavior good, and why is good right?

The recruiter, a sergeant, stands, fulcrum of tension in his mid-back hoisting his chest like a mast. "Take your hands off the desk," he tells Little Chad, "and stand still. You just signed up. So you'll do as I ask."

My brother yells at the sergeant: "Darling, you're a worm!" Such talk, it would seem, is against the rules. Like stealing a brass paperweight of a miniature barque while running out the door. Which we do.

We leap to the car. The sergeant signals to his staff. I toss the paperweight into the grit of the road, slam the door. Following us in a Pinto, the sergeant is angry, squeezing a creased incident report to the steering wheel.

In the bar of the rearview mirror, Little Chad's all-factoring eyes. Now Country Club Drive. Now the curving scallops of Rancho Road. We lose the Coast Guard man, and then we roll into the park, make a purchase. Smoke makes our lungs sweetly numb.

Glazed yellow pastry and coffee in the afternoon. Now the 405 to La Crescenta. Allowing my brother to drive the sequence is my pleasure. We skid to our cousin's house in the foothills' scrub. The cousin's real name is not "Rad." We want to borrow Rad's banged-up two-seat air glider with a porpoise nose.

Skinny Rad is unsure. He stalls. His nails snail over the tops of his toes. “I don’t think you can borrow my plane,” he says. “The panel is quirky.” Then he makes a joke about his yellow dog and its urine. Elbow on the porch railing, he laughs, and three dogs run in the lower yard, yowling. Rad talks to us more, but we only want to borrow the glider and take off.

Little Chad convinces Rad to loan the glider with the promise of a large meal someday in town. Now we launch the plane from the starter. We tumble upward, leaving Rad and the dogs below, buzzing toward the edge of Calabasas. Our weird cousin! Our big mistake with the recruiter! The wind steals our voices and we laugh more.

My brother aims the glider nose-up. It is a troubadour’s sky. The Coast Guard cannot find us now. Little Chad hashes together a rough landing. It is over with a thump to the stomach. We sit a moment in the dust. Now we extract our collapsible bicycles from beneath the plane’s aluminum skin. Now we roll down to Altadena, Little Chad’s curved back in a nylon carmine shirt, the dorsal aspect of a glossy pre-surrealistic fish. His lean legs: weights flying. The bicycle wheel’s best trait is that it never pauses for solace. We skid into a wine festival at the base of the town fountain.

Dry mountains have always been part of our scene. Air is a known intoxicant, you see. Here, the coral brick archways stand filled with it, humming as kilns with heat. We sense the sudden appearance of wind and grass blowing raw. Because there you are: tacit ankles, metallic shoes, nerveless gait. It seems we have met before, and Sabrina is the word for you.

Your soldier’s height and tousled tangerine shirt. Dark hair cut blunt, not long like mine. My brother pulls a Hasselblad out of nowhere, squirms theatrically to find an angle, taking your photograph as if he never has seen a person before. We’re jumbled by the soft tassels on your skirt, your eyes of mineral and titian krill.

“What do you do?” my brother softly asks. In the face of you, he is at a loss.

“I study geology,” you say. “Or I did, but I quit. There’s too much Earth to cope with.” Holding a wine glass, you slope off. You’re a scientist in tight clothes with a bobcat walk.

We follow you, nudging questions. On weekends, you work at a club, you say, waiting for the big earthquake or the end, driving,

like us, as much as you can, listening to dark music to give it all some shape.

Your onyx eyes smart me. You've studied tectonics and Precambrian slate. Which is more woman than I, with my lifetime effort to be the same as he. Now I scan my brother, who is not, at the moment, returning my glances; he's still photographing you without your permission, rudely. He's flattened by you. I'm fuming.