

MOUTH TO MOUTH



**ANTOINE
WILSON**



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I sat at the gate at JFK, having red-eyed my way from Los Angeles, exhausted, minding my own business, reflecting on what I'd seen the night before, shortly after takeoff, shortly before sleep, something I'd never seen before from an airplane.

I'd been on the left side of the plane, and we'd gone south over the ocean, accident of fate, affording me a panoramic view of the city at night: amber streetlights dotting neighborhoods; red-stripe, white-stripe garlands of freeway traffic; mysterious black gaps of waterways and parkland. Then a small burst of light, not at ground level but above it. Another burst of light, streaks opening like a flower in time lapse. A fireworks show. I watched the little explosions until we penetrated the cloud layer.

It wasn't a holiday.

I was thinking about how a sight that might consume our attention completely on the ground could, from another perspective, barely register as a blip on an enormous field, when I heard a name over the PA.

"Jeff Cook," the agent said. "Please check in at the counter for Gate Eleven."

A common enough name, but it piqued my attention. I had known a Jeff Cook once, at UCLA, almost twenty years earlier. Looking up, I saw a handsome man in his forties striding toward the counter. He was dressed in a sharp blue suit, no tie, glasses with transparent Lucite frames. Expensive leather loafers. He said his name to the gate agent and slid his boarding pass and identification across the counter. While she clicked away at the noisy keyboard, he leaned slightly on the handle of his fancy hard-shelled roll-aboard suitcase.

From where I sat near the gate, I could examine this Jeff Cook closely, in profile. I had all but determined that he wasn't the Jeff

Cook I'd known and was going to turn my attention elsewhere, when he looked in my direction. I knew those high, broad cheekbones and that penetrating gaze.

It was he. But Jeff had had famously long, dark flowing hair, not this cropped salt-and-pepper business. Plus he'd put on weight, become more solid in the way so many of us did after college, continuing to grow into manhood long after we thought we'd arrived.

We hadn't been friends, exactly, barely acquaintances, but Jeff was one of those minor players from the past who claimed for himself an outsize role in my memories.

During my freshman year I experienced a series of encounters, if they could even be called that, in various locations on and off campus, with a fellow student who had, for some reason or another, caught my attention. With his cascading hair and distinctive features, he was hard to miss, a sort of thrift-store Adonis, and he carried himself with the quiet confidence of an upperclassman. We didn't cross paths so much as he would just pop up from time to time, at a table in the corner of a coffee shop, wandering around a protest for the first Gulf War, or—most randomly—lit up by my car's reverse lights as I backed out of a friend's driveway one night. Every sighting of this mystery man yielded a frisson, as if he were my guardian angel keeping tabs on me, followed by a pang of anxiety at the thought that I might never see him again.

Near the end of that year, I went with a friend to buy weed from an acquaintance of his, a fellow stoner who had picked up a little extra to hook up his buddies and make a few bucks in the process. We swung by an apartment building on Gayley, an ugly multiunit box. The shabby security vestibule opened on an elevator that stank of rancid hydraulic fluid. Upstairs, the hallway was anonymous and bland, but the apartment had a distinctive grotto-like atmosphere, the windows covered over with bedsheets and the walls festooned with posters, all of them for the same

band, a band I had never heard of: Marillion. We stood awkwardly in the middle of the living room while a line of stoned residents deliquesced into the couch in front of us, eyes more wary than friendly. At the end of the couch, as stoned as the rest of them, sat my long-haired guardian angel. My friend got the pot, and, perhaps to make the visit seem less transactional, his friend made introductions around the room. I learned the name of the mystery man, a name not nearly as mysterious as he was: Jeff.

First quarter of sophomore year, there he was again, in Cinema and Social Change. Every Tuesday and Thursday, in Melnitz Hall, his myth disintegrated further, the slow grind of familiarity rendering him into just another undergrad, a fellow non-film major as clueless as I was about the movies we were discussing. This process struck me as curious. Over the years, it would spring to mind whenever I found myself having to deal with people whose fame summoned in me an irrational but persistent agitation.

The gate agent bent behind the counter to retrieve something from the printer. She handed Jeff his identification and boarding pass. He thanked her and turned to go. When he came past me, I said his name.

He looked at me quizzically.

"Yes?" he said.

"UCLA," I said.

His eyebrows went up behind those Lucite frames.

"Jesus," he said. "You look exactly the same. Plus twenty years or so, but you know what I mean."

I wondered if he was trying to place me. I started to say my name, but he beat me to it.

"That's me," I said.

"Names and faces," he said, tapping his temple. "It's a thing."

Oh God, I thought, he's become a salesman.

He put out his hand to shake.

"That film class," he said. "I remember. Only one I ever took."

"Same."

“Almost failed it. Couldn’t stay awake in the dark. The whole thing felt like a dream.”

“You didn’t miss much,” I said. I didn’t mean it, but I was making conversation.

He smiled and took me in for a moment. “Hey, why don’t you join me in the first-class lounge? I’ve got an extra pass.”

“What about the flight?”

He pointed at the display above the gate. We’d been delayed.

I had already spent hours in the airport, my tickets having been purchased last minute and at the cheapest possible fare—a red-eye from LA, a layover at JFK, a flight to Frankfurt, a four-hour train ride to Berlin—and the idea of a first-class lounge was so appealing I could have hugged old Jeff right there and then.

I trailed him through the terminal, his soft-leather briefcase and fresh-looking roll-aboard making me wish I’d replaced my scruffy backpack with something more adult. The terminal wasn’t packed, but it was crowded enough that we made better progress single file than two abreast. His hair was cropped cleanly in a line above his collar. Everything about him conveyed neatness and taste. In college I’d never seen him in nice clothes, only ripped-up jeans and weathered T-shirts worn inside-out to obscure whatever was written on them. Whether this was fashion or indigence was never clear to me.

The whole way from gate to lounge elevator, as I followed him and the rhythmic ticktock of his bag’s wheels across the terminal’s tiles, he didn’t once look back to make sure I was following. I wondered if he was having second thoughts about inviting me into the land of the fancy people. I hoped I hadn’t seemed too desperate when accepting his offer.

At the elevator, he was back to normal, or how he had been at the gate, delighted at the coincidence and looking forward to catching up, though as far as I knew we didn’t have much to catch up on.

I presumed that he was one of those people who hated being

alone. Perhaps if I'd been paying closer attention, or if I'd known what was to come, I'd have detected a glimmer of desperation in his eyes. I don't know. Maybe it wasn't there, not yet.

We checked into the lounge at a marble counter, where an officious young man took my pass and waved us in, letting us know that they would be announcing when it was time for us to head down to the gate. Jeff found seats by the window, a low table between them, and gestured for me to sit, as if he were my host. The chair was real leather and the table real wood. He offered to grab a few beers. I hadn't had a drink in eight years but said that I'd be happy to watch him drink. He made for the food area, leaving his bags. Even in the airport's privileged inner sanctum, I couldn't look at the unattended bags without imagining they contained contraband, or a bomb. I put it out of my mind. My mantra for air travel has always been: Stop thinking. From the moment one enters the airport, one is subject to a host of procedures and mechanisms designed to get one from point A to point B. Stop thinking and be the cargo.

Jeff strolled up, two beers in hand. He put one in front of me, announcing that he'd found a nonalcoholic brew, and that he wasn't sure if I drank them, but he thought it might make things feel more ceremonial—that was the word he used—for us to catch up over a couple of beers, alcoholic or not, for old times' sake. We had never drunk together that I could remember, but I let it go. We clinked bottles and sipped, our eyes turning to the plane traffic outside.

"The miracle of travel," he said. "Fall asleep someplace, wake up halfway around the world."

"I can't sleep on planes," I said.

"I know a woman," he said, "friend of a friend, you could say, who is terrified of flying but has to travel to various places every year for family obligations. Only flies private, by the way, this is a very wealthy person. And here's what she does. An anesthesiologist comes to her house, knocks her out in her own bed, travels

with her to the airport, to wherever she's going, unconscious, and when they arrive at the destination, she's loaded into whatever bed she's staying in, whether it's one of her other homes or a hotel, and he brings her back. She literally goes to sleep in one place and wakes up in another."

"Someone should do that for us in economy," I said. "You could fit a lot more people on every flight. Sardine style."

Jeff sipped his beer.

"You have business in Frankfurt?" he asked, his eyes passing over my scuffed sneakers.

"Berlin," I said. "My publisher is there."

I didn't mention that I was traveling on my own dime, hoping to capitalize on a German magazine's labeling me a "cult author." Or that I was also taking a much-needed break from family obligations, carving out a week from carpools and grocery shopping to live the life readers picture writers live full-time.

"I can't imagine writing a book," he said.

"Neither can I."

I'd said it before and meant it every time, but people always took it as an expression of false modesty.

Jeff laughed slightly. His demeanor changed, and I expected him to ask if he should have heard of any of my books. Instead, he asked if I'd ever gone under.

"I had my tonsils out in high school."

"Did you worry you wouldn't wake up?"

I shook my head. "Didn't cross my mind. Though were I to go under now, I wouldn't be so cavalier."

"You have kids."

"Two."

"Changes everything, doesn't it?"

He had undergone surgery recently, nothing serious, or not life-threatening at least, but he had ended up terrified that he wouldn't wake up again. It did happen to people. And though such accidents had become exceedingly rare, he couldn't help

but imagine his going to sleep and never waking up, what it would do to his children—he had two as well—and to his wife. The whole episode had disturbed him greatly.

“Sleep is the cousin of death,” I said.

Outside, a jumbo jet came in for a landing, too high and too fast and too far down the runway, at least to my eyes, and maybe to Jeff’s too, since he watched it as well, but it came down fine, slowed dramatically, and made for the taxiway like any other plane. All the activity outside—the low vehicles buzzing around, the marshalers and wing walkers guiding planes with their orange batons, the food service trucks lifting and loading, the jetways extending, the segmented luggage carts rumbling across the tarmac—all of it vibrated under the gray sky like a Boschean tableau.

While I had been watching, he had been hunting down a thought.

“Coming out of surgery,” he said, “waking up in the recovery room, foggy as hell, I didn’t feel the sense of relief I had expected to feel—that only came later when I saw my family again. I felt like I’d lost a chunk of time. Like sleep, but when you sleep you wake up where you went down. I felt that things had happened to me without my knowledge, which they had, of course, and I was left with the uncanny sense that I wasn’t the same person who had gone under. Time had passed, a part of my body was no longer in me, I had had a square shaved from my leg for some kind of circuit-completing electrode, but I was still I, obviously. Now, this may have been a side effect of the drugs, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that I’d only just arrived in the world, as a replacement for the old me. It wore off, as I said, but it wasn’t a pleasant state.”

“Like a near-death experience?” I asked.

“Funny you should say that,” Jeff said, as if he hadn’t just nudged the conversation in that direction. “I ended up in close proximity to one once. Not long after college, in fact, a year or so later. I was, through no planning or forethought on my part, responsible for saving a man’s life.”

I wondered why he emphasized “no planning or forethought” when that would have been the default.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Let me grab a few more beers first.”

“No, no,” I said. “These are on me.”

“They’re free.”

“Let me get them, then.”

He settled into his chair.

I rose and made my way past a variety of travelers, from business types to trust fund hipsters, many of them speaking foreign languages. They weren’t so different from their counterparts downstairs, other than not looking like they were undergoing an ordeal. I ordered beers from the dour bartender. It was not quite noon. When I returned to our table and handed Jeff a bottle, he raised it for another toast.

“Running into you was serendipitous,” he said. “You were there at the beginning.”

"The beginning?" I asked.

"The film class," he said, "with the Nigerian professor."

"Ethiopian," I said.

Jeff looked dubious. "You sure?"

"We watched a Nigerian film, but one hundred percent the prof was from Ethiopia."

Jeff was silent for a moment.

"All these years," he said, "I've been thinking he was Nigerian."

"Changes your story completely."

He caught my smile.

"Okay," he said, "we were in the film class. You, me, my girlfriend Genevieve, who went by G. You remember G?" he asked.

I didn't.

"She was unremarkable," he said. He leaned back like someone who was used to being listened to. "Not that I knew it at the time. Tragically conventional. A film student, the most talented filmmaker in her class by a mile. Top-notch, professional-level work, or so it seemed to me then. But it wasn't just me. Her professors were always gushing over her stuff, talking about grad school, telling her she had a bright career ahead of her if she was willing to put in the work, and so on. Then, senior year, there's a thesis film awards ceremony, and the top prize goes to someone else, a guy, which is bad enough, but a guy whose film was a complete mess."

"That sucks," I said.

"Yeah, I expected G to protest the decision, at least behind closed doors—she was a strong person, driven, but instead she told me that the judges confirmed what she had known all along, that while she might have been gifted in the craft, her work was bloodless. This was a gross distortion, as far as I was concerned.

Her work wasn't bloodless—people had been moved by it. But she wouldn't budge. Once she had decided on something, that was that. She was that kind of person.

"After graduation, she ended up at one of the talent agencies—she wanted to know the business from the inside. It was an insane job with insane hours, but she loved it. Meanwhile I picked up work with a startup, an internet-based city guide, like a curated yellow pages, this was back when the search engines had human editors indexing and categorizing stuff. The upshot of which was that my days were unstructured and full of roaming while she was tethered to desk and phone. It made me anxious, that imbalance, though I don't think I could have put it into words at the time, and so—it's amazing how these things cascade—drunk on champagne at her father's second wedding, I proposed to her. I don't think I wanted so much to be married as I was trying to wipe out the anxiety I was feeling about our inevitable drifting apart. I have to give her credit, she didn't say no. She laughed and kissed me. When we got back to Los Angeles, though, she'd already made up her mind. She had seen the future, and it didn't include our being together. As far as she was concerned, there was no point in prolonging things. Broke both our hearts. I thought we could choose not to be brokenhearted, by deciding to stay together, but like I said, she had a strong personality."

"Ouch," I said.

"She was right, of course."

"Still," I said.

"I loved her, by which I mean I loved the idea of her. It wasn't until a while after we had split up that I began to see how the real her, the actual her, had been obstructed by the *idea of her* I carried around in my head."

He swigged his beer.

"In the wake of the breakup I was miserable, no real money,

no close friends. I was living in a house in the canyons, house-sitting for an actor I knew. Actually, I was house-sitting for an actor who was house-sitting for an actor. I had nothing going on.”

“Sounds familiar,” I said.

“Jesus, that was a long time ago.”

One morning, he said, he awoke to the sound of air whistling through G's nose, only to discover that the source of the sound had been his own nose, congested, and that he was alone.

Since they'd broken up, Jeff had found himself remembering and cherishing things he couldn't have imagined caring about when they were still together. Such was the case with the whistling sound G sometimes made when deeply asleep. The part of him that loved her most tenderly, like the love one might feel for a small, fragile animal, had been activated for him by memories of the nocturnal whistling, faint and rhythmic and above all suffused with a vulnerability she didn't display in waking life, perhaps because she herself was small, a few inches above five feet, barely a hundred pounds. When her breath coursed through the tiny gap in her sinuses or septum or nose itself, it sang a song of shields-down, of a kind of sweetness she rarely allowed him to see. The nose from which that song issued, a wonderfully convex-bridged, slightly out-of-proportion nose, balanced on either side by freckles on either cheek (only later did he realize that people must have treated her like a child), that nose became for him a special feature, which by interrupting her otherwise delicate beauty, enhanced it.

He thought about going back to bed. In that bed, the actor's bed, he and G had run through baby names, joke names, pure hubris, but acknowledged as such, which he thought might lend them a little protection. In that bed, in that house, they had played at adult life, pretending that they had furnished it themselves, that the art on the walls had been purchased on impossibly expensive trips to far-off destinations. The duck painting picked up on La Rambla in Barcelona, the kilim from a man with shaky hands in Istanbul. He would pretend not to know where the

dishes had come from, and she would spin a tale of their origins. In creating a glamorous past they were also envisioning a glorious future. Now, though, everything vibrated with false provenance, the house echoed with associations, both fictional and real, the lightest and most playful now the most oppressive.

He needed out. He dressed, climbed into his old Volvo, and drove west toward Santa Monica.

The sun was not yet up. From atop the bluffs the beach was a dark gray strip, the ocean black. In the dark he walked across the pedestrian bridge over PCH, from one pool of light to the next. The beach lot was empty, nobody around other than a cyclist whizzing past, chasing an amber beam emanating from a box on his handlebars. The sky was a deep brown-black, low clouds reflecting the city's light back onto itself. A distant lump in the sand was either a nuzzling couple or a sleeping homeless person.

The immensity of the ocean was already having an effect on him, diminishing the size of his problems, connecting him to everything elemental and all-but-eternal.

He took off his shoes and socks, then stepped barefoot onto the cold sand, feeling a sense of liberation at his own insignificance, while also feeling—because he was alone, because it was dark, because the entire city lay behind him, asleep—a sense of himself as a sort of local god, surveying his domain under a cloak of invisibility and omnipotence, two sides of the same coin.

He sat at the water's edge, the dry sand just above the high-tide line, and the cold seeped through the seat of his pants. He could make out the horizon, splitting the view, the most distant visible thing on Earth. He fantasized about being dropped off out there, halfway to Japan, treading water, succumbing to exhaustion. He didn't know then that from his vantage the seemingly infinitely distant line was less than two nautical miles away. He was no better at estimating the dimensions of his heartbreak. With G, he'd felt like he was going somewhere, building a life, and now he felt like he'd been sent back to the starting line. As absurd as

it would seem to him later, and actually impossible to re-create in his memory, to recapture the intensity of it, G's absence from his life felt unrelenting and ever present, the first thing he thought of upon waking and the last thing he thought of before sleep descended.

A glow simmered behind him, *fiat lux*, a slow reveal, coaxing sea and sky from the void. Another day begun. Pelicans skimmed the slick water. The hazy outline of a ship appeared in the channel. Nearby seagulls squabbled over a piece of cellophane. High-tide crests peaked but didn't break until they met the shore, ripples crossing the ocean from whatever storm had drummed them up, a rising of the waters, energy passed from one molecule to another like a baton in a relay, transmitted all this way only to fizzle out on the sand.

Just passing through, said a voice inside his head, source unknown, probably a bumper sticker. This happened sometimes—a voice or a song appeared in his thoughts, unbidden but germane to whatever was going on in the moment, as if he didn't have one mind but many and his consciousness worked more like an orchestra conductor than a generator of its own ideas.

Out of the corner of his eye he caught a dark form on the surface of the water. He was pretty sure it hadn't been there a moment before. A clump of kelp? No, a swimmer, making for the shore, an arm slapping the water, then drifting, as if scanning the bottom, like a snorkeler without a snorkel, but then, not. The swimmer undulated with the passing swell. The lack of muscle tension signaled to Jeff that something was wrong. He stood to watch, expecting the swimmer's arm to rise to slap the water again, or his head to turn for a breath, but nothing happened. He went to flag a lifeguard, but the towers were shuttered. Up and down the beach there was only a single woman jogging, too distant to take notice.

He hadn't yet faced a moment like this in his life, one in which he knew, with certainty, that the crisis at hand was his alone to

handle. One during which he wished for the intercession of the god he didn't believe in, or anyone who might know what to do, or even someone as clueless and panicked as himself who could by their presence share the burden. It was one of those crucial moments, one which when reflected on wouldn't be laughed off but would send a chill up his spine, because even if he felt that he had no choice, that anyone would have done what he did in that situation, he would have to acknowledge that he was being tested, because in truth he could have given up, could have despaired, could have walked away, could have pretended he hadn't seen what he'd seen, could have subtracted himself from the scene, told himself that he wasn't even there, that he'd left a moment too early or arrived a moment too late, that the predicament had not in fact fallen in his lap but only grazed him as it passed undisturbed and unaddressed, left to unfold by itself, as nature might have intended.

I pointed out that one's interceding or not could equally represent fate, that letting nature take its course could include any number of interventions, since we ourselves were inseparable from nature.

He considered this for a moment, seemed about to reply, and sipped his beer instead.

The water was so cold, he continued, after he'd polished off the beer and fetched another, that it took his breath away. He felt like he was unable to get enough air into his lungs. Nevertheless, he made for the body, stomping through the shallows in his underwear and T-shirt, and then swimming, thinking that the man was probably okay, that he was being foolish, that the man would pop his head up at any moment and bring to an end what would forever become an embarrassing story about Jeff's tendency to jump to conclusions, to act before considering consequences. These thoughts alternated, round-robin, with others, equally powerful and clear, that this man was dead and had been dead a long time and was only drifting to shore. But hadn't he seen an arm slap the water?

The cold bit into his hands and feet, and though he swam with his head up, he tasted seawater with every stroke. When he reached the body he hesitated to touch it. What if it sprang to life and dragged him down with the last of its energy, as drowning people were said to do?

He took hold of a shoulder and tried to flip the man onto his back, but without being able to touch the bottom, he couldn't get the leverage he needed. He grabbed the man's hand and towed him the short distance to shore, swimming an awkward one-armed breast stroke, scanning the beach for anyone he could call on for help. At the inshore ditch he went underwater and shoved the body from below, using a ripple of swell to propel it onto the sand. It rolled, came to rest on its back, limbs folded awkwardly as if it had fallen from a height.

He stood before it. A middle-aged man in a slick swimmer's wetsuit, tinted goggles, bluish skin, purple lips. He had thought of him as both a he and an it, a man and a body, but now the form

on the sand had resolved into a human being, a he, definitively. No sign of breathing, and he had no idea how to take a pulse. He didn't dare remove the goggles for fear of revealing eyes wide open but unseeing.

He dragged him away from the water's edge, wavelets erasing the track he left in the sand. The jogger was closer now but not yet upon them. The closest telephone was at the beach lot. If he had run back then to dial 911 would anyone have blamed him?

He had seen CPR on television but had no idea how it was really done. He put his hands on the man's chest, locked his elbows, and pumped. The sternum felt like a spring-loaded plate. Water leaked from the side of the man's slack mouth. He counted the compressions uselessly, not knowing when to stop. He knew what came next and didn't hesitate. The lips were cold, the stubble rough. He blew into the man's mouth and water sprayed onto his cheek. He had neglected to pinch the nose.

The chest rose and fell with his breath, but only as a bellows fills and empties. The skin looked no less blue. A feeling of disgust threatened to overtake him, spurred by the idea that he wouldn't be able to save this man, meaning he wasn't breathing air into a human being who needed help but into a corpse.

The jogger appeared, stopping in her tracks twenty feet away. He cried at her to get help and she ran toward the highway.

He returned to pumping the chest. Something cracked under the heel of his hand, and with each subsequent compression he could feel the break in the bone.

Salt water poured thick and foamy from the man's mouth. Nobody would have blamed Jeff for giving up. He wiped the foam aside with the back of his hand and breathed for the swimmer again, trying not to retch. Then to the sternum, the compressions, trying to put out of his mind the feeling of bone scraping against bone.

A seagull stood in the sand not five feet away, watching, its eye black like a wet seed.

Jeff tried to think of himself as a machine, doing the job of the man's heart and lungs, an incessant cycle of breaths and compressions. This went on and on. He wondered when would it be okay to stop.

But stopping would mean leaving the man for dead. He couldn't do that. It wasn't who he was. Someone else would have to come, someone who could take over, a professional, maybe, who could look at this body and determine that there was no saving him and bear the burden of giving up. When would that person arrive? Overcome with exhaustion but seeing no other choice, Jeff continued the compressions, the breaths.

The body convulsed. The swimmer gasped for air and coughed a cough unlike any Jeff had ever heard, sharp and wet at the same time. He rolled away from Jeff, vomited in the sand, moaned, tore off his goggles, vomited again.

Jeff sat paralyzed, exhausted and in awe, confused as to what to do next. He heard the blood coursing through his ears. His gut twisted. He started to shiver.

Spectators materialized. Had they been watching from a distance? One asked if the swimmer was okay. Jeff didn't answer. He wasn't even sure they were asking him.

A lifeguard truck rolled up, lights flashing. An old-timer emerged from the cab, red jacket, red shorts, ruddy face, silver mustache, moving with the equanimity of a lion on the veldt. He crouched by the swimmer, asked questions: What was his name? Did he know where he was? The day of the week? The mumbled responses were inaudible to Jeff. The lifeguard wrapped the swimmer in a gray wool blanket. Two medics in wraparound sunglasses came marching across the sand, each carrying an orange case, their ambulance idling in the beach lot behind them. Help had arrived and was continuing to arrive.

The swimmer tried to sit up, groaning in pain, but was kept supine by the medics, who affixed an oxygen mask to his face.

Jeff asked for a blanket, and it took a moment for the life-

guard to recognize that the long-haired young man before him, in T-shirt and boxers, had been involved and was soaked and hypothermic. He fetched another blanket from the truck and tossed it to Jeff. Jeff pulled it tight over his shoulders. The lifeguard turned his attention to Jeff, and Jeff stood to answer his questions. Dennis—per the name tag, though whether it was a first or last name was never revealed—asked him to describe what had happened. Jeff saw that Dennis's mustache wasn't entirely silver but had patches of yellow in it. As Jeff ran down everything that had occurred, he watched Dennis's eyes go from squinting to wide open, his crow's-feet stretching to reveal little folds of paler skin usually hidden from the sun. Dennis said that the swimmer had been very fortunate that Jeff had been on the beach. This could have been a very different call, he said, as if concerned mainly with the progress of his morning.

The swimmer clutched his chest and moaned again. Dennis went to the truck to pull out a wooden board with straps attached to it. He and the medics started securing the swimmer to it.

The swimmer turned his gaze to Jeff for the first time. With the oxygen mask on his face he was the inverse of the man Jeff had pulled from the water, nose and mouth now covered, eyes exposed, one lid slightly drooping, whether congenital or from the trauma it was impossible to say. His eyes were light, blue or green, and together with his furrowed brow, conveyed puzzlement. He raised his arm a few inches, as if he might point at Jeff or make some other gesture, but a medic guided it back down and strapped him in.

I saved your life, Jeff wanted to say. But it was for the swimmer to say, not him.

More people gathered to see what was going on, and in an effort to get closer, a few moved in front of Jeff. Dennis and the medics loaded the swimmer onto the back of the truck. With the tailgate down and a medic on either side, they rolled toward the beach lot.

The onlookers returned to whatever they'd been doing with their morning, and Jeff was left alone. He gathered his pants, his socks, his shoes—the trail of panic he'd left on his way into the water. He peeled off his soaked shirt and, under the blanket, his underwear. Then he pulled on his dry pants.

The ambulance left the beach lot, sirens howling, and the life-guard truck U-turned away from the lot. Jeff stood, expecting it to return to him, but after heading his way for a moment, it turned south toward the pier. Perhaps Dennis hadn't seen him standing there, or had been called away to handle another emergency.

Jeff collected his shoes, shirt, and underwear, then trudged across the sand to the spiral ramp that led to the pedestrian bridge. Joggers and walkers gave him wide berth. None would meet his eye. Wrapped in a rough wool blanket, barefoot, with disheveled long hair, shirtless, he must have looked like just another of the hard-luck cases wandering aimlessly around that so-called paradise.