

## LINDSEY CRITTENDEN

### *The Impact of Geography*

The interstate passes forty miles north with its big trucks, its family cars to and from Lake Tahoe. Sleek silver passenger jets fly overhead, and bigbellied planes from Travis AFB. But the winds tell the truth. They travel here, through the delta, over these rivers, the Sacramento and the San Joaquin, that split into sloughs and tributaries draining most of California into the San Francisco Bay. All summer long, the hot valley and the foggy Pacific push and pull air through this place, this chunk of fertile farmland broken up into islands and connected by drawbridges that make the hotel guests say to one another, as they pass me dusting a banister or straightening a mirror, that the delta is a place that time has forgotten.

It hasn't. I battle time all day long, sweep its cobwebs from chrome sink legs, sneeze its dust from clouds raised by the vacuum cleaner. Ghosts lean up against the pink walls of this hotel, once the fanciest place for miles with a ballroom and a speakeasy, now the main draw a \$12.95 Sunday brunch on fake deco china. Callie died in January, when the tule fog creeps thick up the levee and hides the trunks of walnut trees down in the groves. Those first months, fog kept the loss hidden, too, so that when the days of uninterrupted blue sky and sunshine came and the orchards put out green leaves, my heart broke. Time had turned winter to spring, and would keep turning, taking me always away.

Driving the levees feels like flying, tires touching asphalt as tall as the tops of trees. Winter rain and spring snowmelt swell the river so she laps the edge of the road, licks dark the burlap of sand bags, scatters uprooted trees and lawn chairs on her

banks. At night, headlights snake along the levee road for miles, cut off suddenly by a scree of trees or a bend in the road, like a blade going down, and then re-emerging brighter than before. Tule fog diffuses the beams, the way a Walnut Grove farmer headed out to tarp his berries one night last January described seeing two lights jiggle, waver, and dim. He watched, thinking how pretty (he told the newspaper later), then dropped the tarp, ran for the phone. By the time the ambulance got there, the car's back bumper had settled against old pilings, and the headlights shone dimly through the water on tiny fish and swaying grasses. The medics used suction cups to open the doors. The driver was a boy from Rio Vista, a friend of Callie's and mine from 4-H. I'd missed the meeting that night because of a sore throat. The speedometer broke at 45, a safe speed on a clear night.

The rains took care of the dark smear at the side of the road where the braking tires pushed dirt and rocks aside, but I still know the spot. Summer's so hot I go twice a day, always with oleander, the prettiest thing around. Because it's poisonous, Callie would say. The hedge in front of my mother's house is clotted with white and pink blooms from May through October, so there's plenty to take. I anchor the flowers with rocks, tuck in a feather. I'm due at the hotel by eight so don't have much time in the morning, but at dusk, I sit and watch the wind move along the river like a shadow pushed by an invisible hand. Houseboats pass, with laughing people who wave at me, and across the river, at the rental cabins, the masts of tied-up sailboats knock together. I am sixteen. If I were to leave, I would climb aboard a boat and slip downriver, under the drawbridges and into Suisun Bay, then under those high four-lane toll bridges into the bigger bays, San Pablo and then San Francisco, and then to the white sparkling city we saw once on a field trip, the famous red bridge at the edge of the sea. Sometimes I drop a twig or petal onto the current, watch it go for me.

One afternoon in May, early into the hot weather, I was making the bed in a third-floor single, when the blinds rattled against the window, getting my attention the way she would have by tossing pebbles or calling the name our mother made from putting our two names together like that of some exotic flower, *Callilinda*. Wind is only visible in what it does—toss a branch upward, snap a drooping pillowcase, scatter moonlight on the river at night. I didn't need to see. The brush of breeze across my skin was enough, the first bit of goodness I'd felt since she died. Only one thing could bring it back. It wasn't so big a leap, no more than what they used to tell us in Sunday school.

I wait all day to feel that breeze again. I vacuum and dust, answer the phone when it rings, wipe off the laminated plastic menus and hang small scratchy towels from hooks. There will be a wedding here tomorrow, a girl we both know from 4-H, and I spend the afternoon in the ballroom sorting cutlery, folding napkins. Sunlight slants in the French doors, and the only things moving are dust motes and my hands. In September, I will turn seventeen alone. When I have finished my tasks, I stand on the parquet floor, close my eyes, lift my arms. A beaded dress hangs heavily from my shoulders, and a man's hand sticks damply to mine. I smell cigarettes and whisky on his breath, rest my cheek against his gabardine shoulder, feel the contour of the flask strapped to his leg. He leads me outside to stand in the shadows, where the breeze from the river stirs my hair. I go, even as I carry the mop and bucket back through the swinging doors into the kitchen and climb the stairs to the vacant single on the third floor. I lie on the clean bed I made earlier, and open the windows as wide as they'll go, raise the blinds. Closing my eyes, I wait for the breeze and when it comes, I tell her how the man's shoes clicked on the parquet and the bamboo rustled outside the open French doors. I tell her how I felt in a man's arms, warm and soft and wet. And when cars with loud engines and radios and laughter pass beneath the window to head out into the

night and all that it holds, I open my eyes on a sky turned dark and a breeze that will soon turn cold.