

Grandma Sonia

A short story by Joshua Milne

I had chills all over my body. In front of me and just above my head a flashing red light had begun to spin and a siren's cry filled the room. My mind was racing trying to make sense of it all. The room had gone from huge to very small in an instant and suddenly a bright light was shining on me like a spotlight. That was right when my Grandma Sonia blind-sided me, slamming into me with all her might and laid me out sprawling on the floor. Shocked, I didn't move. I just lay there looking up at the bright siren light that had started flashing red, red, red, red as my Grandma began to jump up and down, hands in the air, shouting.

My grandparents had picked me up two days earlier, in front of my small and beat up apartment in Isla Vista. It was summer and my roommates were all gone, in fact the whole street felt deserted and quiet as was typical of this college town in August. I clutched a backpack of clothes hurriedly shoved together that morning, just a few shirts and another pair of jeans and a toothbrush, and inside the pack was also a paper bag containing 3 drugs. The first two were Percodan and Hydrocodone. Both of these are opiates and in the same class as Morphine, Opium and Heroin and contain Oxycodone. All of these are derived from alkaloids found in the Opium Poppy, a beautiful flower. The only difference between them is that Percodan also contains aspirin, which helps it absorb into the blood stream faster, and Hydrocodone is synthesized in a slightly different way that gives it a cough suppression quality. Both are strong and highly addictive. I had enough to kill a horse. Several horses. I was in a lot of pain.

They idled their mini-van as I limped over, hugged my grandma, and gingerly bent to climb into the back seat. They had called just the day before and had invited me to come on a spur of the moment trip up the 395 and then, entering the back way, to make a loop around Yosemite National Park. "To take my mind off of it," was their rational for inviting me. I had hurt myself a month before, herniating the disk between my third and fourth lumbar vertebrae in a skateboarding accident and the herniation was rubbing against my sciatic nerve going down my left leg. I had seen a few doctors, been given x-rays, an MRI, and been diagnosed and scheduled for back surgery. My surgery, however, was still not for another week and in the

meantime I was in screaming pain. It felt like someone was hitting the back of my leg with a baseball bat - if I ever let myself come down off the painkillers.

It had happened while skating around the UCSB campus in the dark. I was crazy in those days and I believe it had happened while I was attempting to jump the flight of stairs that led down towards the lagoon from the Ucen building. It's about ten shallow steps and when I came down off center I twisted and sprawled sideways into the grass. I didn't think I was injured when I did it. Just a little shaken. I skated home. The next morning I couldn't get out of bed.

The injury had shaken me to my core. It had taken my strong, coordinated and youthful body and left me at a slow limp, hunched, unable to make eye contact with the beautiful young college girls who passed on my street. The month had seemed like forever. I had been feeling scared and alone and like the value had suddenly been sucked out of me. I felt that I had lost control and power over my own life.

Pain is crazy and unbearable if you keep running from it. There is this place however, where you can begin to accept its presence and start to relax around its edges. Of course, the drugs helped. I spent much of the trip curled up in fetal position in the back seat because it was the one position that took the pressure off of my sciatic nerve. I hated the way the pain medication made me feel cloudy and thick, furry on the inside and slow. I had the opportunity to smoke actual Opium once, in the parking lot of a Grateful Dead concert, and the experience was totally different - energy and a feeling of invincibility and power. Heroin, Morphine and Opium are all natural and come from the milk inside the seed pods of that Poppy. In poetry it has been described as drinking milk from the breast of the goddess. The Opium made me feel like I had super powers. The name Heroin is derived from the same Greek root word that we get the word Hero from, and for a good reason. But these pain killers, while they might have had a positive side to them on the first two or three doses, quickly began to feel like a deep pit that was sucking me in, seductive and tactile and covert, pulling me down. The positive was that I was not in screaming pain, but I played with the edge while curled in the backseat. I'd let myself come down far enough and I would get into a deep meditation, projecting myself outward and away from the pain and then going back in through it, beginning to relax its edges, sit with it, make friends with it. Not too long in the past, before we had such readily available pain medication, every human would need to go through the experience of deep physical pain that you cannot run from.

It is primal. It teaches us things that are deeper than words. It is a learning experience and a spiritual trial by fire and an initiation.

My grandparents chatted to me in the backseat as we passed the Death Valley Junction, then the tiny towns of Independence and Big Pine and then Bishop before the highway began its upward slope into the Sierra with dense, tall trees flanking the car and took the left up towards Tuolumne Meadows, climbing ever higher and higher into dry pine forest. They both had distinct English accents. My Mom and her parents had come over from England on a ship named the The United States of America in 1957. She was 9. There was nothing glamorous about it. The ship was packed past full, people sleeping on deck. They traveled second class, below deck and with no window in their small room. The Atlantic was gloomy and violent and my mother threw up and couldn't eat the entire trip wracked with seasickness. They came through immigration in the port in New York with only what they could carry. Then they bought an old Ford station wagon with their dwindling savings and headed west like so many people before them. They were lucky. England was still reeling from the war that had left her in rubble and depression more than twelve years earlier. My grandfather had been working in a coal mine after the war but had taken an apprenticeship at Technicolor Labs in London and there began to learn to edit film. There was no film work to be had in England and so the long migration to Los Angeles was a gamble, an escape, and a pilgrimage. My grandmother too had dreams of upward mobility and they essentially dragged their small family across the planet to follow their dreams. At the last minute they had to leave my uncle 11, back in England with his Aunt. He had contracted Tuberculosis and was too sick to travel and they feared that they would miss their chance if they waited for him to get better.

Grandma was a talker. She could monologue for hours seemingly nonstop if she was allowed and there was an ear to listen to her. She delighted to have company, visitors or guests, and to be at any sort of gathering or dinner or party of any kind lit her up. She would hold forth with her opinions on politics, culture, art, relationships and history, talking while chewing her food and drinking cheap red wine. I have only rarely met anyone so opinionated. I loved her more than I can explain. She was to me the embodiment of love and the universal mother, kind, quick witted, sharp tongued and easy to laugh. When I was young I idolized her like a priestess in some ancient druidic cult and thought she knew everything. As I got

older, however, I slowly realized that she was wrong about a great many things. Aren't we all? Instead of becoming disillusioned with her it made me love her even more and began to teach me that we do not need to agree with someone in order to love them.

Hitler bombed London relentlessly for 5 years beginning in July 1940 with the Battle of Britain, a four-month air battle between the Royal Air Force and the Luftwaffe in the sky above the city. Then, unable to force the English to surrender in battle, the Germans began a campaign of terror bombing of civilians. Starting on September 7th of that year, the London Blitz began with 57 straight days of brutal bombing days and nights. The bombs would continue till 1945 with nighttime raids, the air raid sirens splitting the soot filled London air with a regular certainty. The well-off families fled the city or at least shipped their children to the countryside to escape the nightmare. Neither of my grandparent's families could afford this luxury.

Whatever hardship it is going to war, risking your own life, witnessing death and destruction and whatever strength it takes to persevere in the face of almost certain pain and death I can only imagine. Hell. Also, I can only bow to the strength it must have taken to lead your children into the bomb shelters when the air raid sirens began to wail as they did nightly for long stretches of days. To huddle with them, to sleep, to cook for them and hold them and tell them it was going to be alright.

In my grandmother's family there were 12 children and it was her mother that had shepherded the children down into the bomb shelter day after day. It was a communal shelter built for the neighborhood and could shelter close to 100 people. They also sheltered in the tube station as flakes and small shards of brick and cement and dust would sometimes rain down on them as the lights flickered and people would go silent, the noise of the children ceasing like insects as one walks by a thicket as everyone, even the atheists, prayed that it was not their home and not their neighbor and not their street and couldn't help but mentally calculate by the vibration and concussion how far away the bomb had fallen and had the planes passed and when would they return. Terror.

They danced. It's unbelievable, but they danced to swing music in the dark of the bomb shelter. The adults would gather at one end and make food and cups of tea and the teenagers and bigger children would gather at the other end and play records and dance. This is where my grandparents met. In the shelter, swing-

dancing to the 40's pop jazz played by big bands back in the states like the Benny Goodman Orchestra, Duke Ellington and Charlie Parker and slow to Ella Fitzgerald, Glenn Miller, Billie Holiday and Louis Armstrong. Later, in her 70's, my grandmother would still play this music and ballads by Blossom Dearie and when I got a little older she told me stories of make-out sessions in inky blackness of the back of the bomb shelter as the others slept.

When the war started my grandmother was 13 and she spent her teenage years in the surreal haze of a rubble strewn wartime London. By the time the fighting was over she was 18 and was already pregnant with my uncle.

We drove the back way along the 120 into Yosemite National Park, up and over Tioga Pass. At 9,943 feet it's the highest mountain pass in the Sierra Nevada mountain range, normally covered in 20 to 40 feet of snow and only open in the summer and early fall. There were still snowbanks on the sides of the road and melting hunks of ice dotted the landscape in every shadow as we began our decent through Dana Meadows and then into Tuolumne Meadow and further, following the snaking road through the upper valley with the trees breaking suddenly for vast glimpses of jutting granite mountaintops, waterfalls, and endless trees only to be swallowed by the forest again as we made the decent to the valley floor.

On a downhill curve approaching the valley and with my gaze lifted to the vertical wall of Half Dome, amazed, I felt the car suddenly swerve and lurch to the side of the road. My Grandfather had hit and killed a Grey Squirrel. They live all over the park and I had already marveled at them scampering effortlessly from branch to branch playing chase along the side of the road.

The squirrel lay motionless in the road behind us as my grandparents got out of the car. I don't think I had ever seen my Grandpa upset about anything. He was so reserved, English and emotionless usually. In fact, he was so reserved that he rarely spoke unless it was necessary, leaving all the talking to my Grandma. So, as I stumbled from the backseat I was a little shocked to see his face visibly twisted with emotion and holding back tears. I had drifted clear of my pain-killer haze as we had wound into the park and we all stood staring at the dead squirrel helpless. It had been a direct hit and there was nothing we could do. We had driven into this nature sanctuary in a big metal machine spewing poison exhaust and immediately ran over and killed one of its residents whose family had lived in this valley for untold

generations. Some will think it's ridiculous for me to view it this way, but those were my thoughts as I stood there.

My grandmother made light of the situation, as she did with any and all emotion. It was a function of survival for her and soon we were back on the road and she was telling a story of how her own grandparents had been river gypsies on the Thames and how her mother had grown up on a barge traveling up and down the river selling spices and wool.

That night we slept in a lodge just outside the west entrance of the park and the sound of the Merced river just down the bank bathed us all in white noise. I fell into a dreamless, pain killer infused sleep as I thought of El Capitan and our short walk to view Vernal Falls, the only time we left the car, and the group of white-tailed Mule Deer I had seen gracing a meadow from the side of the road as we drove past.

As I said, I had three drugs in the paper sack that was stuffed in with my clothes. The third was more mysterious, harder to come by, and couldn't be procured with a prescription. Inside the bag was a plastic bag and then inside that was another zip-loc bag and then inside that was 4 hits of perfectly pure liquid Lysergic acid diethylamide or LSD-25 as it is more widely known. For ease of travel I had dripped one drop each on four C&H sugar cubes. The liquid absorbed into the sugar and the cube was dry enough and solid enough to begin with that it retained its shape and would last quite a long time if stored properly. I had brought them on a whim and with the somewhat bizarre intention of using them to explore the pain that I was in and then only if I found myself immersed in nature and safely away from my traveling partners. My grandparents weren't much for hiking however and we had barely stopped as we raced through what is one of the most beautiful places on Earth the day before.

That morning we ate early, packed up, and were on the road by 9 and headed down the highway following the winding Merced and then the Tuolumne River as the landscape fell into rolling hills and then passing Pine Mountain Lake and then Don Pedro Lake as we entered gold country. We then turned on highway 49 through the rich farmland below the sierra foothills till Placerville where we took the 50 up again gradually entering the lush forest of Ponderosa and White Pine, Sugar Pine, Douglas-Fir and Quaking Aspen, heading ever upwards towards Lake Tahoe.

I'm not sure what made it seem like a good idea, but sitting in the backseat there, watching the landscape build and passively listening to my grandmother go on and on about politics and the formation of the park system and Theodore Roosevelt and The Antiquities Act of 1906, I dropped a hit of the sugar cube acid in my mouth. I could feel a nervous electricity in my system almost immediately. It felt right and so I ate another. Around the edges of my vision there were hints of something I couldn't put my finger on - something not quite normal.

I lay in the backseat and thought about my physics class at school. At the end of the quarter we had been reading about the famous Double-Slit Experiment of 1801 in which Thomas Young shone light against a plate cut with two narrow slits and then against a screen beyond. The results showed that light from the two slits refracted and interfered with each other just like waves, yet also was recorded on the screen in grouped yet discrete points, just like particles. It would be more than one hundred years before physics would develop a theory to begin to explain this and still today Quantum Mechanics is understood by very few people. It essentially proves that things can be of two natures at once. That our three-dimensional view of the world that we walk around with, thinking that it is reality, is woefully incomplete and that, as Dylan says, we contain multitudes. Nothing had ever been black and white. And clearly humanity has yet to catch up.

About 20 minutes later, just as I began noticing that the trees were gently moving and seeming to reach their web of branches out towards me, we came over a rise and the turquoise jewel of Tahoe was visible in front of us reflecting sunlight, and the cars whizzing by us began to leave trails of color behind them as they enveloped past. I lay back down in the backseat with my knees up and just let it all wash over me, closed my eyes and behind my eyelids was the beginning of an electrical storm of color.

From South Lake Tahoe, my grandfather piloted the car around the lake's western edge and in another half hour we were across the border into Nevada and pulling up in the parking lot of a grand old hotel-casino called the Cal-Neva Lodge. The Cal-Neva had been owned by Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin back in the 60's and early 70's and there was still a certain mystique about the place.

Suffice to say the trip around the lake had not seemed so simple to me. The acid had kicked in like a wildfire in high wind, rushing through my mind and sparking through my neural network like electric flowers blooming. I tried without success

not to say anything for fear that it may incriminate me as being high out of my mind. In the parking lot I babbled something incoherent about not being hungry and wanting to see the lake. I desperately wanted to escape the car and feel fresh air and the expanse of the mountains.

My Grandma, however, reached back and handed me two rolls of quarters.

“The slot machines are hot here.” She grinned at me. She knew. I immediately felt that she knew I was high on acid. I swear she winked at me.

“I’m not 21,” I said lamely.

“You look old enough to me. No one will know the difference. They just want your money. If you sit at one machine long enough they will even come by and serve you free drinks.”

I just stared at her. The skin on her face was melting off her skull. The rolls of quarters weighed twenty pounds in my hand.

“Our one rule is that if anyone wins more than we walked in with, we leave right then. They want you to pump it back into the casino thinking you will win more, but we walk out. We’re walking in with a hundred dollars between the three of us. If you win more than that we take it and leave.”

I had no idea what she was talking about, but I followed them through the slanting afternoon light, across the tree lined parking lot, under the huge green awning and in through the wide sliding glass doors of the Cal-Neva Lodge.

“You ready?” My Grandpa looked back at me and chuckled. Damn. He knew too.

Inside was chaos. A casino is where the American dream meets the human nightmare. Overwhelming color spun out of darkness as my eyes adjusted and grotesque monsters of people walked by holding drinks as I stepped onto the swirling carpet.

Grandma put her arm around me. “Blackjack and Craps are down that way. Don’t bother with those, the dealer will suss you out. In the back are nickel slots and quarter machines, Plinko, and older games like that. The dollar slots have a bigger payout but you go through your money pretty fast. I like the quarter machines the best.”

In front of us was a cast as bizarre as the bar scene on Tatooine. A woman with an enormously long nose was laying chips in small stacks on green and black

checkered felt next to her husband who was laughing through rotting teeth as he pointed with curved fingers covered in gold rings. I winced.

“This is Roulette,” my Grandma went on, “invented by the French in the 1600’s. Don’t mess with it. I’ve never won.” She leaned in close to me. “It’s rigged. The dealer has a little button under the table that he pushes to pop the ball back out if someone looks like they might win.”

I paused, hypnotized by the Roulette wheel spinning in front of me and the little white ball, bouncing for what seemed like a short eternity, changing its mind, eliciting a yell and a gasp but then an audible moan as it settled on a number and no one won. I had a brief feeling that I could figure this one out, but Grandma had given specific instructions.

My grandparents were headed off down a long row of slot machines and I followed, but distracted by a sudden eruption of change spilling on to the floor on my left, I lost them immediately and was suddenly alone. I was a still point in a chaos of gambling. The woman scooping change up off the floor was crying. Was she sick? She looked green and her arms were much too long for her body. The music pulsed Cindy Lauper in the background blending in with the jangle of the casino. There was a large hole forming in the floor in the center of the isle, sucking the carpet into it, and I inched around it, determined to not go down the rabbit hole and set my eyes fixating on an empty slot just down the row. I wasn’t going to let the fact that space-time was coming apart at the edges stop me.

“A what?” I said to the short skirted girl who had stopped next to me after I sat at the slot for just a minute, still staring, still unable to fathom what I was meant to do next. She had very high heels on.

“A drink. Can I get you a drink on the house?” She asked sweetly. She had bright red lips. She knew, and she also knew I was under 21 but didn’t care.

“A Margarita?” I said. I couldn’t think of anything else. Again I stared at the contraption in front of me, mystified. As the girl walked away I felt the weight of the quarters again in my hand. I had forgotten all about them. Ah, yes, it was all coming back to me now. I fumbled with the wrapper and then was holding a thin sliver of metal and then searching for an opening and, there it was! I gently, reverently, pushed the quarter into the slot and... nothing happened. I looked around, intently staring at the withered old man a few machines away pulling the lever of his slot in slow motion. Yes! I reached out, grasping the lever and... I... pulled...

Magic! Suddenly the machine came to life. A blur of sound and color. A jingle of musical kinetic dance contained in metal as the three internal wheels spun symbols and numbers. I could feel it vibrate. It sang a beautiful, beeping song to me as one by one the wheels stopped, jiggling bright red cherries. I smiled uncontrollably looking at one, two, then three juicy sets of identical, delicious fruit. What cryptic meaning was this? The tinkle of five dollars in quarters raining into the tray was somehow related to the cherries but I was mystified.

I immediately put another quarter in and watched the show repeat. Then another. I was hooked. This time it was two different fruit and an American flag. Perfect. The next time it was a seven, a flag and a watermelon. Still in awe, I kept going and the next spin brought three lemons wiggling into view. The clink, clink of just five quarters for my one was thrilling.

“You are having some luck today.” It was the waitress. She grinned at me like the Cheshire Cat.

“I am?” I took the cold drink she was handing to me. Her eyes looked into my soul. I found myself staring and remembering that we had shared past lives together. I even began to glimpse detail...

“Have you tried the machines down there?” She motioned tantalizingly down the aisle.

“I’ll try them now.” I couldn’t resist her suggestion and began to get up and walk away.

“Don’t forget your quarters.” she giggled at me.

I didn’t know what she was talking about and just looked into her eyes.

“In the tray. You won them.” her voice like a wood nymph. “Here, take this.” She handed me a plastic chalice.

“Oh... “ I took it but it was empty. Empty like my head. Empty like my soul. I was so high.

“For the quarters,” she laughed at me and shook her head. I scooped the round pieces of metal from the tray as she walked the direction she had motioned. Then I followed.

Down the aisle was something magnificent. It was as if the entire casino was directing my attention to this one place. A shrine. A holy place of worship for quarter lovers and lever pullers. Walking along the row of slots I could just catch a glimpse, but coming now around the corner its sacred geometry came into full view.

Bethlehem. St. Peter's, Hades. Five tall slot machines grouped together in a circle, stacked with lights and above them a flashing light-board of bulbs spelling out "Progressive Jackpot". This was it. There was a seat right there in front.

Suddenly a deep neural program kicked into gear and I stopped short, an alarm in my head putting me on alert as I scanned the room for danger. In my peripheral vision I saw him before he saw me. A security guard. I shuddered and moved to hide myself. Actually cowered behind the nearest hulk of metal. But he turned and saw me, saw me as I attempted to look away, to act casual, to hunch my shoulders and look small. He changed course and headed across the room towards me. I had been made, I was sure, and looked around for an escape route.

"How are you doing this afternoon?" He was standing right in front of me, smiling a devil's grin at my glaring discomfort. His security guard uniform and badge were already like a geometric prison of bars and locks and assumptions.

"Really enjoying myself," I said back. "This slot machine is beautiful." Oh, god, why did I say that?

He laughed at me. "It sure is. Why don't you play this one?" He gestured over to it, across the carpet from us, inviting me to sit down. So, with a margarita in my hand, I walked to the magnetic bank of slots and sat my 19-year-old ass right down where the security guard told me to. He seemed pleased. "You enjoy your time at the Cal-Neva," he said as he walked away.

"I sure will do that," I called after him. Then, turning my attention to the machine, I again had to struggle to figure out how it worked. I ran my hand over it. Felt the window that peered into the drums that were just waiting there. I felt the cold, shiny steel of its body. Then, there it was, the slot. Quickly two quarters were in my hand and down the chute. How had I known that this one required two? I could feel the potential as I pulled the lever and was surprised and delighted to be treated to a show far more nuanced than the last machines. Clicking, whirring and vibrating, the slot served up three mismatched fruit, but the show was worth two quarters to me. The moment itself was tantalizing. As soon as it had stopped I was ready with its food and fed it to keep it alive. I pulled again, enjoying the show, and then again.

Slowly, as I was caught in the hypnotic dance of feeding this finely crafted piece of metal its food, I became aware of a rising energy, a pull, a draw from above. I looked up and it was as if a bright light was suddenly shining on me from the sky. I

was peaking on the two hits of acid now and to me the entire ceiling of the casino had vanished and the pure sweet light of the sun was shining down in a shaft right on to me, bathing me in a pure white light. I was being blessed. I kept feeding the mechanism in front of me. It was so beautiful, I was going to feed it all my quarters in a mad rush of devotion. I pulled again and again. Some of the pulls elicited a short rain of quarters into the tray but they were lost in a symphony of whirring gears and electrical beeps. I barely paused to register the symbols as they quivered into view each time they came to rest.

It was right then that suddenly time stopped. Before my eyes gently one, then another cylinder came to a stop with a mystical number 7 infused with a bolt of lightning right through the center. Not quite having comprehended the first two I stared as the third also performed the same dance. Three bright yellow number sevens shot right through with lightning bolts!

It all happened in the space of two seconds: There was an eruption of sound. Bells. A siren jumped to life, wailing and spinning. The machine flashed from inside brighter and brighter and the red siren pulsed synesthetic gyrations... Then I got hit.

My Grandma broadsided me with all her might. With split second reflexes she had seen me win that jackpot, understood that I was underage, and acted with an NBA player's agility to knock me sprawling, take my place, and then act as if she had done no wrong. She raised her hands into the air, jumping and yelling, "I won! I won! I won!"

From the floor, my drink spilled across my chest, I gawked up at her, not understanding what was going on. I wanted to protest. "But, wait," I struggled to say. "Why?" I began to struggle to my feet as a crowd quickly gathered,

"Get lost," she nodded at me as people began to congratulate her and the security guard appeared around the corner, followed by a bald floor boss with a serious smile.

I tried to take her advice and inched backwards but I couldn't tear myself from the scene.

The floor boss introduced himself to my grandmother then excused himself quickly. "The machines obviously don't have that much change in them, so I am going to have to go to the office and get your cash," he said.

I had hit the progressive jackpot of \$1,281. Probably a good thing that they wouldn't pay out in quarters.

Always the realist, my grandfather peered over his shoulder as they walked away, "They've gone to look at the tape. They most likely have you on camera at the machine." He looked nervous. "Maybe you should head to the car."

"No." My Grandma was defiant. "They've got nothing." She was scanning the ceiling for cameras. "I don't see a camera in here." Remember, this was the early 90's.

Within moments the security guard came back around the corner. He gave me a knowing nod.

The ramifications of what was happening were so amplified inside my psychedelic addled mind that I was about to experience the outcome here as a validation of good versus evil - infused with meaning..but then none of this is real. This is all a game. This is just nature playing a random game of chance with us. Physics playing a roll of the dice with matter. Or fate. Or is it? Just like the double-slit experiment, my sense was that it was both. From around the corner the pit boss strode back over to my grandmother. He didn't even look my way.

"What's your name?" He reached out to shake my grandmother's hand.

"Sonia. Sonia Smith," she lied, and then extended her hand too and they shook.

"Well, Mrs. Smith, congratulations are in order. You have won our progressive jackpot." With that he took the cash he had been holding in his left hand and began counting twelve hundred-dollar bills into my grandmother's palm. All around him the crowd counted with him, several people cheering as he said, "Nine, Ten, Eleven, Twelve!" And then he counted out the twenties and one single. "One thousand two hundred and eighty-one dollars," he pronounced as soon as he was done.

My grandparents hugged and said thank you to a few of the people gathered around congratulating her. I was in satori. The carpet breathed and rolled beneath our feet and the siren still flashed above us mockingly. We still had to escape. My shirt was all wet. The lights all around me had begun to kaleidoscope in my vision and I looked around to see if anyone else had noticed the huge hole in the ceiling.

"Meet us by the car," my Grandma said as she and my Grandpa rushed by me.

It took me a while to find my way out. None of the exits were obvious and I wandered around in a circle, for a few minutes even forgetting that I was looking for an exit and becoming engrossed with the spectacle of a Michael Jackson

impersonator who was moonwalking and dancing at the entrance to the lounge. Finally, I did find the front entrance and as the glass doors slid open, in a last-minute bout of paranoia I expected to see a sheriff's car sitting there with matching red lights. The fresh blast of warm mountain air hit me though and lifted me from myself and I crossed the lot as if gravity was pulling me back towards our parking spot.

"Beginner's luck," my Grandma beamed back at me as I slid into the back seat. I hadn't even thought about my back in hours.

"I can't believe you got away with that," my grandfather shook his head, not quite ready to laugh about it. I wasn't sure if he was talking to me or her.

"Well, we're not out of Tahoe yet," my Grandma reached back over the seat and handed me the cash. "To the state line please, driver."

I don't think I had ever held that much money all at once at that point in my life. It seemed like a huge sum to me and I held it reverently and with a little awe. We pulled out of the parking lot and headed west. How strange money is... that these paltry pieces of paper hold so much value. "I'm not sure what to do with it," I said. I was still so high.

"Well, it is customary to share the winnings a bit with your accomplices," she suggested.

I smiled a broad grin and took out two hundred and handed it back to my Grandma as outside the window we passed a large green sign that read "Welcome to California!"