

## LORRAINE SHEMESH

*Riddle*, 2018  
Oil on canvas, 60½ x 62 in



COURTESY GERALD PETERS GALLERY, NEW YORK

## JOHN CHANDLER

### Dark

November 19, 1973

1.

It's raw out, one in the afternoon, way too late to be starting. He had to wait for Myra to get back with her car to drive him here, to Highway 1 and the Salinas Road overpass. His only other option was walking, and that would have taken three hours plus, on two-lane country roads, with a pack on his back, and after last night's sleeplessness, he just didn't have it in him. Len wasn't coming near him, not after yesterday, so his VW van was out. Myra and her Volvo were the only option.

He lifts the collar of his wool shirt and stares out over the fields between him and the ocean. The offshore fog is visible in the slight wind, and there is a white heron stilled, forty yards away, beak toward the ground. He steps away from the side of the road toward the bird, stamps his boot, throws his hands up, and shouts. The heron does not react, though a memory stirs, two years ago, he and Nadine hitching from this same spot, he standing on his head, watching Nadine upside down laughing next to him, thumb out, flicking back her long blonde hair. The yogi and the beautiful blonde.

Cars pass. A passenger leans his cheek against the window, mouths *Fucking hippie*. Fifteen minutes pass, twenty. He and Nadine got a ride in the second car, he remembers, all the way to San Diego.

He puts his pack on, takes it off, holds his thumb still, jerks it at the cars as they approach. Nothing stops the intermittent stream of vehicles past him. He takes a few moments to check into his pack, see what he threw in here—a change of underwear, two clean pairs of socks, another pair of jeans, two shirts, a towel, a knife, a down jacket, twenty-three dollars, and a flashlight he didn't check before he grabbed it. He turns it on, discovers its weak beam.

Finally a Chevy truck leaves the pavement and creeps along the dirt to a near stop forty feet ahead. He shrugs his pack up without fastening the belt and trots toward the passenger side, the pack bouncing against his lower back, until he comes almost abreast of the car door handle. His eyes settle on the man's bib overalls first, the kind his father was wearing as an adolescent in the one photo saved from his growing up on that bleak Kansas farm. A glance up into

## Silence, just the sound of the underpowered engine as they come in view of the smokestacks of Moss Landing . . .

the driver's face, a face he in spite of any logic expects to be his father's, tells him the man's spotted something he doesn't like, something that flexes his jaw and moves his head away with a shake, something that starts the truck in motion, out of reach, back onto the highway.

"Fuck you," he yells after it. "Fuck you, asshole."

Another half hour passes. Any idea of hiking into Sykes Hot Springs today is out, especially with the weak batteries. Likely rides are passing him by. What do they see?

At two thirty a VW camper, light-green body, dark-green side doors, tire on the front, a '67, same year as the one Len brought to the commune, pulls over alongside him. The driver leans across, smiles. He has a narrow, long head, glasses, sideburns, carefully combed, shoulder-length hair, parted in the middle. He is wearing a cinnamon-colored sweater and an open-collared dress shirt. "Hi," he says. "Where you headed?"

Music on the tape deck, "The Sounds of Silence," the trickle-in opening, the greeting—*Hello, Darkness, my old friend* . . .

"Down to Big Sur," he says, trying to blot out the music, the words, trying to hide from this driver whatever it was the pickup guy noticed. "Tucson," actually, he mumbles.

"Well, I'm going as far as LA if you're not in a hurry. I'll probably stop near the beginning of Big Sur tonight, poke along down through the rest tomorrow."

He can hardly pay attention, Simon and Garfunkel pulling at him. He wants to stop the song so he can concentrate. It's enough to know he'll get to Big Sur.

"That's good," he says. "That's fine."

"Good then," the man says, his smile broadening. "Just put your pack back there, between the seats."

He opens the side doors, to an interior so familiar he has to shake himself to remember where he is. A *vision softly creeping*, he hears, *left its seeds while I was sleeping* . . . He slings his pack where the driver suggested, on the far side of the refrigerator/sink, takes a long outbreath, closes the doors, and lifts into the passenger seat.

"I'm Raymond," the driver says, pulling the van back onto the road. He's around Tom's age, has thin forearms and long fingers that are stretched over the steering wheel, rings on the three inner fingers of the right hand. The hand lifts and extends in a handshake. The handshake is energetic, the palm soft against his crusty palm.

"Tom," he says.

Simon and Garfunkel have moved into an ominous section of the song, *In restless dreams I walked alone*—a dream turning on the dreamer, that's what the song is all about, he just never really thought of it that way—in *the naked light I saw* . . .

"Would you mind," he says. He points toward the knob of the sound system.

"Oh," Raymond says, "I'm sorry."

"That's okay," Tom says. "I'm just . . ."

"No problem," Raymond says, extending an index finger, expelling the tape. "I shouldn't assume you'd have the same taste in music as I do."

"No, I like them, I like that song."

"You don't have to. It was presumptuous of me . . . I mean I shouldn't have assumed . . ."

"I said I liked it, okay?"

He doesn't know how Raymond reacts to the tone in his question. He can't turn his face to look.

"Just not . . . just not at the moment, he says. Okay?"

"Of course."

### 2.

Silence, just the sound of the underpowered engine as they come in view of the smokestacks of Moss Landing, curve through the wetlands, dotted with egrets, and the harbor, pass alongside the power plant.

"Are you from around here?" Raymond asks. "Santa Cruz?"

"Yeah."

"How has it been down here?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know," Raymond says, "Murder Capital of the U.S. I can't help but imagine the whole county must be abuzz with it. It's getting a lot of press up in the city."

"Yeah, it's been strange."

"Who was it on trial down there recently? The one who'd murdered his grandparents when he was a teenager, then all those coeds and his mother?"

"Kemper."

"Right. Edmund Kemper. Do you know anything about that case?"

"No."

"No inside information?"

"Unh-unh."

Raymond makes a sound in his throat of disbelief.

"Kemper was tried right there, though," he adds. "Right? At the courthouse in Santa Cruz. Just a few days ago. Crisly details. Lit up the news. You didn't hear about it?"

"I said no. No I didn't."

"You just knew the name."

"That's what I said. I knew the name. Everyone around here knows the name."

"Very intelligent, I've heard, Kemper. A genius IQ. And a giant. The other two of the big three, as I see the press calls them, was it Mullin and Frazier? They've never caught my interest. They just seemed crazy, and garishly crazy, but Kemper, he has dimension, if you know what I mean."

Tom stares at the road. He is sweating. He unbuttons and pulls off his wool shirt, tugs the neckline of the gray T-shirt away from his throat, stares straight ahead.

Raymond glances over, says, "Probably makes drivers think twice before they pick some stranger up."

"I guess."

"You look like you work out," Raymond says. "Strong arms."

"I just work," Tom says. "Physical work. I don't work out."

"Don't like gyms, eh?"

"I get plenty of exercise doing practical things. I do yoga on the side. I don't need a gym. Strength and agility."

Raymond laughs gently. "Good for you. A man who comes by his muscles honestly."

"It's not my cup of tea, that's all. But I don't have anything against gyms."

"So what do you do, I mean specifically, to stay in shape, besides yoga?"

"I'm on a small farm. It takes work. Bending, lifting, pushing, pulling, carrying. I just finished digging a drainage ditch. Why?"

"I live in the city. I'm afraid I'm gym oriented. But I admire exercise that produces something. Going down a line of machines in a room, it's pretty ridiculous, if you think about it."

Tom shrugs his shoulders.

"And do you farm it alone? Your small farm?"

"No, there's a household."

"A household?"

"A group, okay?"

"Is it a commune?"

"Yeah, you could say that."

"How many people?"

"It varies."

"Sometimes more, sometimes fewer, you mean?"

"That's what I just said, yeah."

"I'm sorry to be asking so many questions. It's just that I've read a number of articles about these rural communes, and I think they're very interesting. But I've never actually been to one. What do you grow?"

"Vegetables, you name it, fruit trees. We have a goat, for milk, chickens for eggs."

"Must cut down on grocery expenses, right?"

Tom nods. He does not mention the figure he has worked out—\$140 a month is his share of everything: house payment, fund for unforeseen emergencies, property taxes, insurance, gas, electricity, communal car expenses, food and clothes for him and one of the children.

"Pretty demanding, though, I bet," Raymond says, "doing everything yourselves. Labor-intensive."

"Yeah."

"So where did it all begin?"

"What do you mean?"

"How did all of you come together?"

"It's too long a story."

Raymond lifts his palms off the steering wheel

a moment, opens them upward as if to indicate he has nothing but time on his hands.

"Just forget it," Tom says. "I don't want to talk about it."

"I'll bet you have quite a story there with your commune. Anyway, I guess you don't have time, with all your chores and your farm, and your commune, to get into town for things like trials."

### 3.

He'd nearly killed her, three days ago, the day after his visit to the courthouse, Kemper on the stand describing all of it in his nasal voice, the whole story, what went through his mind, before, during, and after, what he did with the heads. Stopping on the concrete steps outside the courthouse during a recess, Tom had listened in amazement to a woman a few feet from him tell a friend Kemper was an animal, there was nothing human in him. To Tom at that moment there was no one in the world more human. He was compelled by everything about the man: the bandaged wrists, the scholarly pallor, how articulate, how clearly smart he was, how honest, how unsparring. Even his sense of humor when he talked about how he had gotten Herb Mullin to stop raving in the cell next to him—throwing water into his face when he began—behavior modification, Kemper explained. The moment when he rose to demonstrate something and towered massively over tiny Judge Brauer, inches away, the gasp it drew from the gallery. He could lift a ninety-pound bag of cement straight-armed in each arm, had earned the nickname where he worked of Forklift.

But most magnetizing, what held Tom with its precision, its relentlessness, was the loneliness haunting the voice, impelling, investing every word, every expression with truth, the round wire-rim glasses behind which the eyes swam, his years of driving back and forth between Cabrillo College and the university, picking up hitchhiking girls, trying without success as they rode so close beside him, inches of space separating their alive flesh from his, to feel some invisible barrier lift, some connection, to *feel*. And each ride driving him further from feeling, back into the cold, dense anger and hopelessness of himself. And this, these acts the consequence.

That was his confession, declaration, whatever word fit.

A hollowing kinship at the core of himself, that was how he felt, standing on those concrete steps during the break, listening to the woman dismiss the manacled man up there in the witness seat.

The hike the next day, into a remote area near the university, how could Nadine refuse when he proposed it? After all, the agreement was they'd stay friends, she had said a week ago that was what she wanted, for them to move as friends, retaining the love even as they let the sex go, moving into this new phase of their relationship. The words, except for the sex exclusion, were close to the ones he'd used a year ago when he'd dismissed her from the commune, saying now that she was attending the university, she should be living in town. He'd visit weekends. It was understood he would be the only one to lie down with her, in her rented room, in the cooperative household of undergraduates, in the old Victorian in the Seabright section of Santa Cruz.

How he'd loved the arrangement of the last year, the sex on the weekends, the pleasure of returning to this body that welcomed and invited him in, conversations with the undergraduates Nadine now lived with. The enjoyment of occasional other women, the freedom of letting his instincts carry him forward into the pleasure of being alive. It was better than ever, experiencing this surging sense of strength and certainty. This was how he had always wanted to live, free and independent of all the rules and fears and compromises that had regulated his parents' lives and imposed themselves, through his parents, onto him, without giving him what it took to move into the adult world. He had had to do that himself. Now he was free, learning each day what that word meant—*free*—unrestricted, unfazed by anything, now that he had left his fear behind. From managing the budget to dealing with a faltering septic system to informing hunters that no guns were allowed on the property, he took challenges on and found solutions. He worked the garden, mediated conflicts between the kids, talked to teachers, was cordial to his ex-wife's lovers, commiserated with her that none of them stayed for more than a few months. He thought she and Len would get together when Len's wife left—they'd been lovers before, after all, back when they were graduate art students. But Len wasn't interested. So Len and he now had the five children.

But change was what life was all about, after all, and a commune was a changing thing. He met the challenge head-on, giving extra time to the kids, playing trust games with them on the living room rug, incorporating them into his yoga postures, reading to them at night from the *Trilogy of the Rings*, calming their concerns at the absence of their mothers.

And at the end of the week, he found solace with Nadine, went to movies, took hikes, told her the stories of the commune, stories in which he could not avoid noticing he'd performed with skill and patience, solved crises, calmed tempers, put the word out that they had two rooms available, and within a week after his ex-wife's departure, Arnold and Myra arrived. He knew both of them, Arnold, a mailman who'd just split with his wife and whose child was a year behind Sarah, Tom's daughter, in Little School; and Myra, whom Tom had met a couple of years back when he had stopped to use the phone at the home of a friend and had come onto a porch of naked sunbathing women. Myra had jumped up and shown him inside, where the phone was, and stood naked a few moments, her breasts bulging out at him, a short, Rubenesque woman, smiling, an open invitation. He'd never taken her up on it, and here she was, with her peculiar child, Garrett, who talked about himself as a machine, and her reluctant new partner.

And sure enough, three weeks later, Arnold was gone and Garrett and Myra remained.

Then a week ago on his weekend visit, Nadine had said she wanted to be free to meet someone else. There was no one at present, but she wanted to be open to dating. She said it in the same affectionate voice, with the same smile, the smile she gave to only him, and he thought at first it was a momentary impulse, that she would change her mind. Then, over the next few days a hole in him opened, where she'd removed herself, gently, so gently he didn't realize what had just happened.

Why had he gone to the Kemper trial? Did he tell himself it was just curiosity? Get away from the farm for a day. Why not? It didn't cost anything.

But when Kemper began to talk, Tom came to understand why he was really there, summoned to witness.

As he and Nadine walked into the wooded area, she pointed out a little over-energetically the new growth, deer scat, things he usually enjoyed noticing, but now he could

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feel in her tone the reaffirmation of what she had told him, and the wish that he be okay with it too; he watched her as she talked in her most soothing voice, removing her lovely, familiar body from him, moving into a separate world, yes, it was affirmed in him as she tried to smile away the concern that kept working back into her forehead, as they walked farther in, until she stood with the sun on her face in the high, dead grass of that slope, her long blonde hair illuminated, her beautiful young skin, her long neck, her concern that they'd gotten farther and farther away from everything, deeper down this off path. He gazed at her, his mind squeezing out everything else, his body quickening. He focused on her hair, her cheekbones, the way she held herself, her long, lovely legs. He had only to lock eyes, move slowly, straight toward her this small distance across the path, silently, smiling, to close his hands over her throat, feel the power and certainty, the intimacy of control: he would be the last one. That was all that mattered.

They'd stood there, where she'd stopped, three feet apart, silent, her smile fighting to stay on, to meet his, to be accepted by him. He watched her decide against saying something, sigh, stop herself from looking around, smile a conciliatory smile, and finally, in her softest voice, tilting her head so that her hair fell backward over her shoulders, say, "I'm so glad you suggested this. This has been great. Let's do this hike again soon. I have some studying to do, though, tonight. What do you think about calling it for today?"

In that moment he couldn't do it, his body wouldn't move forward. All he could do was nod, and now the moment was past, she was gone.

*“I apologize for saying this,” Raymond says finally, “but you seem, well, I guess I’d use the word haunted.”*

4.

Tom clears his throat, glances toward Raymond. It’s probably five minutes since that last thing Raymond said, the maybe-mocking tone, subtle, careful, like he doesn’t believe Tom but he won’t say that. The way he kept probing. The way he said “*things like trials, chores*,” as though it was all child’s work Tom had been talking about.

“So you’re having a little escape,” Raymond says.

“What does that mean?”

“From all the hard work. I mean, it sounds as though you work very hard so you’re taking some time off.”

“Yeah.”

“Is your farm, your commune, I mean, near where I picked you up?”

“Pretty near.”

“So you walked to that spot?”

“No.”

“Someone brought you?”

“That’s right.”

“Someone from your farm?”

“Unh-hunh.” Tom squints at the highway, remembers the Tibetan coin Myra gave him, for protection on the highway, when she pulled her Volvo over to let him out. How she started crying, that he was going or because of what had happened between him and Len the afternoon before, or because she thought that meant he really cared about her. He didn’t even want to know the reason, he just wanted to get away.

They pass alongside Fort Ord without speaking further. “I apologize for saying this,” Raymond says finally, “but you seem, well, I guess I’d use the word *haunted*. I don’t mean that in a judgmental way. Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” Tom says, “of course I am.” He leans away from Raymond, stung or touched unprepared, he can’t be sure which, everything is an attack; but maybe he’s grateful.

“I’m sorry,” Raymond says. “I sincerely apologize. I mean no ill, honestly. I’m sorry for intruding. I gave in to a voyeuristic impulse. It’s a weakness of mine.”

“Yeah, well . . .” The apology has calmed him some, he’s surprised to notice. There’s an impulse he pushes back, a stupid, stupid impulse to tell Raymond how yesterday he dropped the hammer by the outside door as he stormed in from the garden to confront Len after he’d witnessed Len and Myra through the living room window embracing. How he’d faced Len down and would have gone crazy, would have done a terrible thing if Len had shown the slightest impulse to push back, how he can’t rid himself of this rage and shame, how it keeps surging up, eager for a target, someone to attack, how he’s the opposite of everything he has wanted to believe he’d become, obsessed by thoughts the opposite of what he has heard himself preach the past years, how the dropping of the hammer still seems to him less a decision than a slip in the trajectory of his rage. How he still shudders, feeling the contact over and over as though it really happened, seeing the hammer break through Len’s skull.

He shakes his head. No way. Another thought, something he’s known from the first instant but not fully acknowledged until now—Raymond is gay. Is that why he’s being so friendly? A preliminary to sex. Or maybe he’s just kind, maybe he has that kindness Tom talked so much about, that elusive kindness he no longer believes exists, now that he’s been exposed to himself.

“Say,” Raymond says as the van reaches the summit and the straining engine abruptly quiets, “I have an idea. I’m a fan of the California missions, I’ve been to all of them, and I’d been toying with the idea of going to the Carmel mission this trip. I find it a very peaceful place. Quiet and comforting. It might be nice to stop, get out a few minutes, stretch, clear our heads. I like to go inside.”

“You want to stop.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I like stopping at the missions, didn’t I just say that? I feel peaceful there.”

“Okay, yeah, sure. It’s just that it’s getting late.”

“Just for a little while.”

Tom presses his forehead into his palms. “Just don’t leave me there,” he whispers.

“No, no, I won’t. Really . . .”

There’s a hand on his shoulder, for just a moment. Tom flinches. It leaves.

“Because I’m telling you,” Tom says, “I need to get to Big Sur.”

“No, it’s okay. We’ll get there. I just want to spend fifteen minutes or so here. It will be relaxing.”

“I’m sorry,” Tom mutters. “I’m just having a bad day.”

“It’s all right. It’s very soothing there in the mission, you’ll see. Then we’ll continue down to Big Sur, okay?”

“Yeah. Okay.”

Within moments they are off Highway 1, winding down Rio Road into Carmel and into view of the Mission San Carlos Borromeo de Carmelo. It is a shock, stopping, the abrupt absence of engine noise. Raymond pulls the key from the ignition, opens his door, and steps outside, closing the door behind him. Was it a rushed action? Is he going to run, report Tom to someone? He is shorter than Tom thought, and thinner, even with the bulk of the sweater. *Don’t fuck around with me now*. He squeezes his eyes shut. A memory of yesterday, making Len’s face show him fear before he let him loose. Len, his closest friend.

Raymond is staring through the window at Tom, pointing to the mission.

“I can’t,” Tom mouths.

Raymond reopens the door and smiles up at him.

“But why not?” he asks. “There’s nobody here. Look, the parking lot is empty.” He sweeps his hand out at the vacant area. “We’ll be alone. It’ll be good for you, trust me.”

Tom searches his eyes for deceit. “Check to see there’s no one in there,” he says.

Raymond disappears into the mission as Tom lets himself down from the van, stands alongside it, the sensation of being watched pressing against his temples. He catches a glimpse of his face in the side mirror—wary eyes, lips pulled back in the middle of his beard. A killer. A scared killer—as Raymond reappears, smiling, nods that the place

is empty, waves Tom forward.

Inside, they walk slowly, side by side under the domed ceiling, past pews on either side, down the center aisle toward the front wall—like a wedding, Tom thinks with disgust—to where Christ is suspended on the cross. It is earthy inside, cold holding. A tomb. Raymond mentions he once considered becoming a priest. The sound of his voice echoes slightly, floats out into the walls and ceiling. He discusses the history of the place; a few phrases—second mission built . . . most authentic restoration . . . Junípero Serra—register in Tom’s brain. It is the voice itself that absorbs him. It is measured, incantatory, consoling. Kind. That word reappears. He is kind and he is taking care of me. I can let myself trust him. A swell of gratitude. And shame. He’s been all but outright threatening and Raymond has been nothing but kind and understanding. He closes his eyes a moment, imagines being blind, led by this kind stranger into a place of peace.

“I think this is enough,” Raymond says. “Don’t you? Shall we continue?”

Tom nods. “This was a good idea, he says softly. Thank you. Sorry about how I was.”

“You can be any way you need to be right now,” Raymond answers, as he pulls back out onto the highway. “It’s okay. I appreciate your willingness to make this little detour. It’s nice to have you as a traveling partner.”

They pass through the last stoplight, the cove of Monastery Beach, wind up into the Carmel Highlands. The sun is low, steep hills on their left, new green from the rains, the ocean on their right, clouds above, a hawk on the telephone wire, a beam across the water nearing the sunset. The refuge of Big Sur.

“Nice, isn’t it?” Raymond says quietly. “Good time of day.”

“Unh-hunh.”

“Lot of memories here?”

Tom nods. “Lots.”

“I’ve only passed through, you know, down for the day kind of thing. I mostly read about things. You’ve probably backpacked in here.”

“Yeah.”

“There are hot springs, I know. I don’t mean Esalen, I mean hot springs you have to exert a lot of energy to get to.”

“Yeah. Sykes for one. Twelve miles in.”

*He stares at the thin line of smoke leaving Raymond's mouth. Relax, he tells himself.*

"Hard hiking?"

"Steep at the start, the first third, but then not bad."

"A hot soak for sore muscles at the end of the day, huh?"

"Yeah, get that weight off your sweaty back. Feels good."

"I'll bet. How much weight?"

"Depends. Thirty-five, forty, forty-five pounds, depending on how long you're out."

"Well it's out of my league," Raymond says as Rocky Point comes up. "As I said, I read about adventure, but the truth is I like comfort too much."

"People are comfortable in different places," Tom says. The statement sounds sane in his ear, the kind of thing a sane person would say.

Raymond nods and smiles and says, "That's so true. Say, it seems a shame to not really experience this sunset, what do you say we pull over up here. I have some food, enough for a couple of sandwiches and a beer. How's that sound?"

The offer awakens Tom's hunger, only a piece of fruit this morning, so distracted, so rushed to get himself packed and out, away from Len and Myra.

"Well okay," he says. "Thanks."

A few hundred yards past the restaurant, Raymond eases the van off the road, opens the side doors to the sunset, produces from the mini fridge two sandwiches and two beers, hands one of each to Tom, who has grabbed his wool shirt, moved to the floor of the bus, and is dangling his feet, watching the water and the orange and red lights at the horizon intensify. The sandwich: Roast beef, cheese, lettuce, tomato, mustard, mayonnaise. He hasn't had beef

in two years. Or alcohol. But why not? What's all that purification gotten him?

Raymond sits beside him. There's just enough room.

"About Notleys Landing," he says, "which is right here, you know, where we are. It has an interesting history."

"Oh yeah," Tom says. "Right." He is stunned at the immediate effect of the beer. A layer of wariness wetted down. "So what's the history?"

"It started as a lumbering operation," Raymond says. "Back at the turn of the century they cut redwood, lots of it, clear-cut and shipped out of here. And tanbark. Plunder, basically. Then during Prohibition there was a dance hall and bar. Wild parties Saturday nights. And I mean wild. Lime kiln workers mostly. They say there were dead Italians in the woods every Sunday morning. The law didn't come down this far. I don't know if there was some kind of arrangement with Carmel police or if the cops were just scared to try to police it, coming out and being ambushed. They could just wait in the trees and pick them off as they drove by. This was all before Highway 1 was completed."

"How'd you find that out?" Tom asks, pulled into it. It is a relief to listen, to be drawn away from himself into another story. He should know that, he who discovered with teaching his talent for telling a story, that was always his appeal to women. Nadine told him early on that she used to listen to his voice in class and think it was a kind of singing.

"I read a lot," Raymond says. "You act and I read. I always read about places I'm going to visit. That way I feel I've already been there. Whereas you seem to just go and be willing to deal with things as they come up. That demands bravery."

Tom shakes his head, tilts the bottle, and drinks, thinks about that word, *bravery*.

"Stupidity, you mean."

"That's not what I said. Say, do you smoke?"

"Grass?" Tom asks.

"Yes, I brought some good stuff and I thought I might light up a joint in honor of the sunset. Care to join me?"

"Okay," he says. "Sure, I'll have a hit. Thanks."

Raymond fishes in the glove compartment, brings out an Altoids tin. Inside an unlit joint and lighter.

"You do the honors."

Tom takes a toke, as he hands the joint back he recognizes the strength of what he's just taken in, resists

coughing. This was a mistake, what was he thinking, getting himself into this situation? He stares at the thin line of smoke leaving Raymond's mouth. *Relax*, he tells himself.

Raymond offers the joint again, Tom shakes his head, watches as Raymond in slow motion lowers the joint into the tin and shuts the lid.

"Colombian," Raymond says. "Strong." Raymond's eyes, the whites streaked with pink, meet his, smiling. "So, I've just told you my little history story, my little research project. Would you tell me the story of one of your backpacking trips here to Sykes Hot Springs? For my vicarious pleasure."

Tom squints at the last slice of sun disappearing into the ocean. He remembers suddenly the batteries in his flashlight, the complete darkness of Big Sur.

**John Chandler** is a writer based in Santa Cruz, California, who has previously published a number of stories and poems in various magazines, including *Catamaran Literary Reader*. He is married to the poet and playwright Wilma Marcus Chandler, who is also an excellent critic of his works. He is much cheerier in person than this piece indicates.