

“Finally.” Aunt Sabine popped the Diet Coke.

Mom came in quietly, no sound of a door closing. Her hair was frizzier than usual, face flushed. I saw bandages on her hand and bolted up.

“There’s my sister, always almost on time,” Uncle Peter called out, staring at the tv.

“Sorry, car had some trouble on the freeway. You ready to go, sweetie?”

“Yeah. What happened to your hand?”

“Go use the bathroom before we go, okay?”

I ran up the stairs. Aunt Sabine’s voice followed.

“So, Mike’s staying in a beach house? *That’s fancy.*” I didn’t hear Mom’s answer.

The toilet had a built-in plastic cushion. I thought about the Switch Palaces in Super Mario World, levels where, at the very end, Mario would jump onto a giant yellow switch and remake the whole world. Before, wherever there had been invisible square outlines, now would be Power-Up Boxes. The screen would freeze. Happy music played.

I reached for the toilet paper but there was only the little cardboard thing. I stood for a minute, looking for a spare roll, then sat back down. I tilted, reached my hand down there, and wiped with my fingers. It wasn’t as messy as I would’ve thought.

The white walls got smeared reddish brown. One streak. Another. A circle. A triangle. Just enough for a Power-Up Box, a square with an exclamation point in the middle. I pulled my pants up, washed my hands extra long.

Mom, Uncle Peter, and Aunt Sabine stood around the kitchen island. I grabbed my duffel bag.

“Should we bring the Super Nintendo home for Michael?” I asked.

“Nah,” Uncle Peter said. “He’ll grab it next time he comes. Don’t worry, bud, you guys will have a blast playing it.”

We said goodbye.

The house looked smaller from the driveway. In the upstairs window, yellow curtains moved. Angela peeked out for a minute, sneaky, couldn’t see her hair or the rest of her body. Just a pale hand. A perfect, blue-eyed face like an Irish doll. I waved. She disappeared behind the curtains.

Instead of the burgundy Cadillac DeVille, a small, gray Toyota truck was parked next to Uncle Peter’s James Bond car. The door creaked when I opened it.

“Where’s the Cadillac?”

“It overheated. I couldn’t get it to start.” She slid her sunglasses on and took off her jacket. The bandages wrapped up her wrist to the elbow.

“The goddamn engine water splashed all over me,” she said, before I could ask. “Remember to never, ever, *ever* try to put water into an overheated engine, okay? Just wait it out, even if you’re on the side of Highway 80, running late to pick up your favorite person in the world.”

She grinned at me. I didn’t say anything.

“So. I dropped you off, ate that last stuffed mushroom, and drove south. It was gross by the way.” She winked at me. “Then what’d you do?”

I started from the top. Kept some things to myself. The road curled between tall, stained walls and onto the freeway. I asked her about Michael.

“He looks a lot like Uncle Peter, huh?”

“I guess.”

After a few minutes she said, “You know, when Michael was a baby, maybe two or three, Peter asked if he could take . . .” her voice got quiet.

“What did he ask?”

“Nothing, sweetie.” Mom sped up and merged into the fast lane. “Just if I needed help. I said no.”

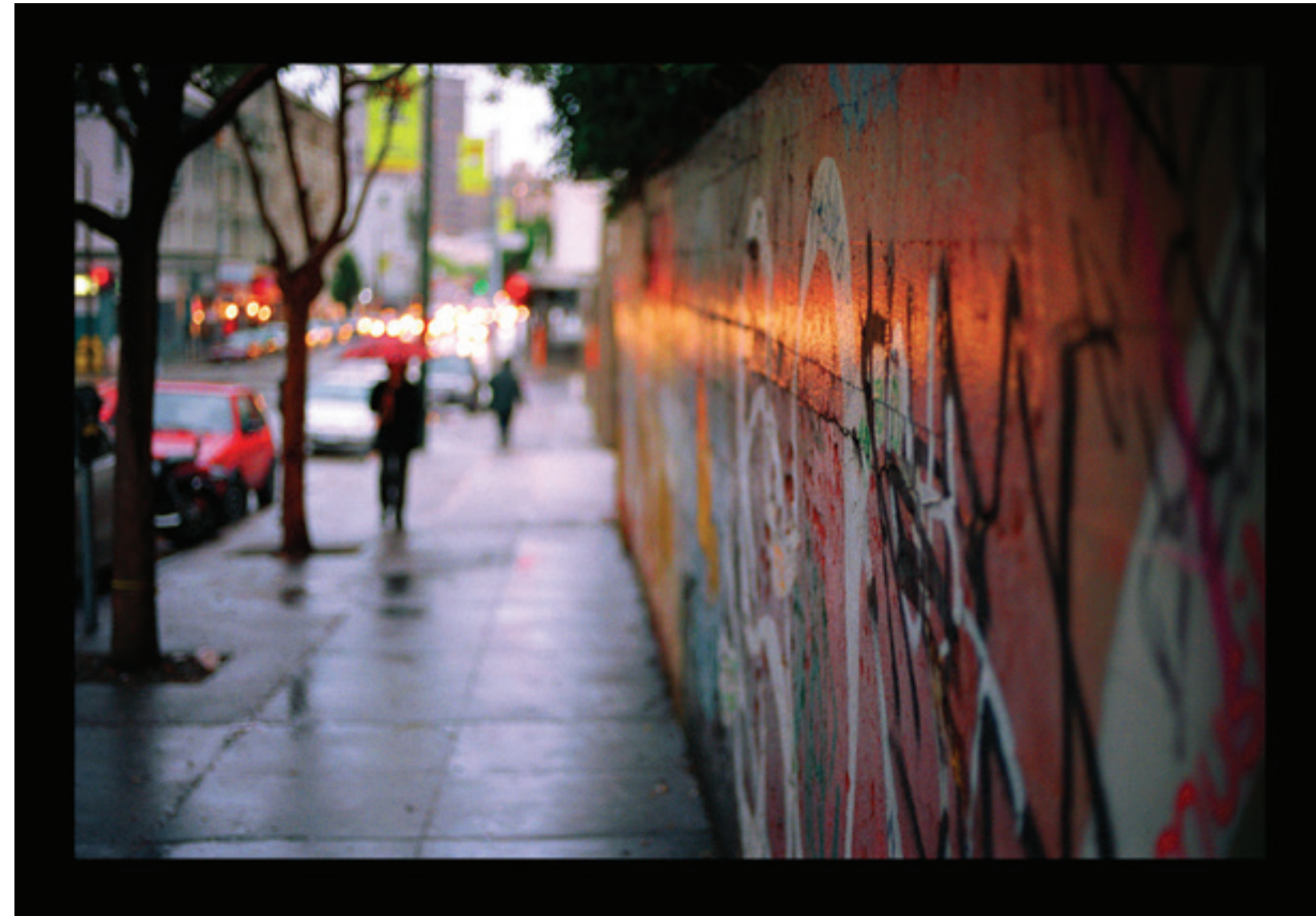
“Oh.”

Mom turned the radio up. A Gottschalks commercial played.

**Reilly Nolan** lives in Sonoma County, California, with his wife and daughter and is an alumnus of Sonoma State University and a Chico, California, native. His work has appeared or will appear in *ZAUM* and *Nomadic Journal*, among other publications.

## CHIP SCHEUER

*Graffiti*, 2017  
35mm negative film, 20 x 24 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST