

# Free-Fall

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Mary called herself Josephine when she was high. She was a dropout from school, from home, and from life. She bounced between the curbs of the town like tumbleweed and drifted among congenital losers. They found warmth and security in their collective misery and huddled around their pathologies like a campfire, blowing on the embers of empathy.

One early morning, Josephine threw up onto the white linoleum floor of the teen shelter in which she was staying. The staff accused her of alcohol abuse and summarily tossed her out. In the proceeding nights, she slept in the lighted doorway of a department store, under window displays of the latest spring fashions. But her illness did not go away, and she only felt better after smoking drugs. What was unknown to her was that her condition came as the result of a brief encounter that had masticated into a fetus. Despite the cruel environment in which it found itself, the fetus grew into a baby.

Josephine left town in the passenger side of a Ford Fairlane which had its back windows obscured by clothes and garbage and the political sensibilities of the driver pasted to the bumper of the car. They were heading east and across the mountains, to some destination that was not entirely clear to Josephine. Shortly into the trip she struggled to make herself comfortable in the bucket seat.

“Jesus, my back is killing me,” she moaned.

The driver was a sullen man with hollow cheeks and sunken eyes. His jaws tightened at her crying. At half past midnight, she rubbed her stomach and fought to find comfort in the cramped quarters of the car.

“I’ve got to pee. Pull over at the next gas station, Mark. Okay?” Josephine lit a cigarette, took two puffs and handed it over to the driver, placing it in his lips. “Okay, baby?”

“There’s no station around, Josie. How are we supposed to get going if I’m looking for a restroom? Huh?”

She sat back into her seat, but it was not long before her back pain seared through her and she doubled over at the waist. “Jesus, Mark, Jesus...pull over!”

You stupid bitch, can’t wait, can’t wait? Well alright!”

The driver swerved over to the side of the highway with a jerking motion, and the tires slid and crunched over the loose gravel of the shoulder. Josephine crawled out of the car door and scissored her legs over the guardrail. She half slid, half fell, down the embankment into the grass-lined ditch below. After she had emptied her bladder, she finally came to terms with her condition. And after flashing pain and convulsions of agony, she gave birth to a son. But the child was as foreign to her as the man on the moon, and she merely looked at the

squirming child as it lay in the tall grass. Mark yelled from the open door and revved the engine of the car. She looked from the car to the child and back again. Her future held little ambition or promise and she knew it. The most solid plan she had lay inside of the open passenger car door. But inexplicably, she transferred those same conditions onto her new child, and left it in the sawgrass of the ditch. The child struggled in the raw environment as its mother climbed up the embankment and drove away east, and over the mountains.

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Jerry burned the Japanese out of their machine gun nests and tunnels built into the hillsides of Okinawa. He could step through the fan of bullets laid in front of his feet and switch back across the bluff until he was in range of the enemy. At a brief lull in the firefight, he would swiftly turn and trigger a stream of oil and flame. Scorched and smoldering bodies struggled to the opening of their encampments and either died directly from their wounds or were gunned down by the platoon supporting Jerry.

When they struggled to raise the American flag on the top of Okinawa, it was as much Jerry's conquest as any other man's. When he returned home, he was awarded medals for honor and valor. But the parades of adoration back home that puffed his chest and made him misty with pride slowly gave way to a nagging shame. And that shame began to consume him, so much that Jerry began to feel that he was shrinking. He looked for religious guidance with his pastor, and he looked for compassion from his family, and he talked to his friends on the base to find sympathy, but his struggle ended up being his own.

At night, screams filled his ears until they woke him from his sleep, and his nose was filled with the smell of petroleum and burning flesh. The blood pounding in his ears muffled the horror of his own cries. Those nights turned to days, and the day offered redemption and hope, and he was free from his nightmares. But one day, echoes reverberated from the wooden plank walls of his garage and he climbed into his car with a start. Further on and down the road the same screams came from the trunk of his car, and it was not until Jerry ran from the car, left in the middle of the street, that he was able to escape the cacophony of shrieks.

The government signed the unconditional surrender on the deck of the U.S.S. Missouri and packed the war criminals into the dockets of Nuremberg, but no one surrendered the war for Jerry. The noises culled and chased him now, and they refused to let him sleep. He filled his ears with cotton, and he slept during the day, but they were as crafty as he was in war, and Jerry slowly lost his strength. So while he sought refuge in a cedar lined closet, Jerry put a gun to his head to quiet the screams in his ears, as the dogs of war and the hounds of hell scratched and clawed on the door outside.

Although it was true that Bebe began to die the minute she was born, it was not until the blood pumped from Bobby Kennedy's head onto the kitchen floor of the Ambassador Hotel in 1968, that she truly lost her passion for life. Yet, over the course of the years she maintained a presence she knew would be admired, if not by conviction, then by deed. Her life became a conscious and conspicuous show of ephemeral and political servitude. And if her life was perceived engulfed and consumed by altruistic pursuits, it should be noted that she hid a certain satisfaction that Ronald Reagan now wore diapers.

She currently held seminars on the effects of globalization that were poorly attended and talked about recycling to school assemblies that made the children wiggle ten minutes into her presentation, but it was her sideshow that pleased her the most. The lectures and seminars drained her, as she preached the virtues of her ideology to the great unwashed, but her carnival act brought life to her. Called "Bebe, the Good", she worked with trained dogs and birds to put on a show dedicated to saving the environment. At the appropriate moments, the dogs would pant when she talked about greenhouse gases and the holes in the ozone. And the birds would play dead when she talked about the rape of the rainforests, and it appeared the animals were the stars of the show. Though the skit became preachy and dull half way through the program, it was the promise to the children that they could pet the dogs and birds after the show that kept them in their seats. The shows went on, from festival to state fair to circus with, more or less, a successful run. But after three successive shows in which one parrot after another, failing to recognize the weight of their social impact, flew away and her favorite dog, Karl, was run over by a van full of Mormons, she fell into an existential funk that she could not shake. She stopped attending organization and union meetings. Correspondence to her friends and compatriots in the common struggle grew fewer and farther between. So it was not a terrible shock or surprise to those who knew her that a crime story appeared in the local paper followed by an obituary a few days later.

A homeless man beat Bebe to death with a tree branch as she tried to feed the indigent in Volunteer Park. And although Reagan survived Bebe, it was still a heated question as to who held the most conviction in their lives.

For Walter, anger, like love, was its own reward. It excited his senses and dulled his mind. Its effects filled him fully, and, like a narcotic, the pursuit of duplicating this stimulation became an obsession. That fulfillment for Walter came at the expense of the infirm and indigent of the society.

But like a narcotic, a level of tolerance was acquired; so much that it required greater and greater atrocities to satiate his needs. Often, he left his longings unrequited and his

energies spent on unsatisfactory pursuits. He never outgrew his lust. It lay dormant in him until it was awakened by a vision, a knot in his stomach and the quickening of his heart. The plans he made were becoming less of an obsession than they were calculating. He stalked his prey, days before they met, and he followed his victims, searching for patterns in their lives. All to satiate his needs. The chase became as heady as the act.

Finally, one night, in a fit of anger that made his legs tremble and his vision blur, Walter consummated his greatest atrocity yet. The crime was splashed across the national papers and after an abbreviated trial, Walter led a somber but brief life in prison. His thoughts were filled with the nostalgic memories of his lust for rage.

The gallery below was filled with friends and relatives of Walters' victims. Worn and tired from the years of contempt, they watched Walter drop through the spring-loaded trap door and jerk by his neck some feet below. They, too, found out that anger was its own reward as they shuffled out the side door of the execution chamber.