

Praise for

IN THE MOUTH OF THE WOLF

“Bill McCausland deftly weaves a complex and compelling story that shows the long-lasting effects of war. Beautifully written, *In the Mouth of the Wolf* is a pleasure to experience and will make all readers look at human conflicts in a new way.”

—ANN HOWARD CREEL. Award-winning author of nine novels, seven for young adults and two for adults

“*In the Mouth of the Wolf* is an honest, provocative and complex narrative full of adventures along the California coast and road trips to Laguna Salada and Santo Tomás in Mexico. Through an astute understanding of his own emotional terrain, Memo makes sense of his odyssey. From the depths of war’s aftermath and a compelling love affair, he discovers within himself the ability to navigate life’s dangerous opportunities.”

—JEANMARIE MORELLI. Magazine and newspaper writer

“*In the Mouth of the Wolf* explores the collateral damage of war inflicted upon soldiers, and their loved ones, after returning home from Vietnam. Heartbreaking, riveting, astonishing, and beautifully rendered, this story is a major stoke. McCausland is a Big Wave story teller. He masterfully evokes the battles that engulf Memo and his Vietnam vet buddies and their families after returning home from the war. With compassion, voice, pace, and riveting tension, McCausland takes us on an unflinching, powerful journey of discovery, healing, and redemption. His book deserves a place on your bookshelf, right between *For Whom The Bell Tolls* and *The Things They Carried*. McCausland is the real deal.”

—GUY BIEDERMAN. Playwright, actor, creative writing professor, and author of *House Samurai*

IN THE MOUTH OF THE WOLF

Bill McCausland



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TO

FIRST SERGEANT DAVID MCNERNEY

IN THE MOUTH OF THE WOLF is dedicated to First Sergeant McNerney who was awarded the United States highest decoration, the Congressional Medal of Honor.

1SG McNerney was my first sergeant in the company where I was assigned in the United States before being deployed to Vietnam. At that time he was a celebrity on post. He was awarded the Medal of Honor for his heroism in the battle of Polei Doc and taking over the company when the commanding officers were killed.

The area was named, "The Valley of the Tears," and later a documentary film was made about the battle that was called *Honor in the Valley of the Tears*. There were many wounds and casualties and 1SG McNerney single-handedly took out a machine gun nest that was causing the impact on his company. He then gathered up explosives and detonated trees to make a landing zone for helicopters to evaluate and evacuate the casualties. The men in this battle are considered to be the most highly decorated during the Vietnam War.

In 2008, I reestablished contact with 1SG McNerney, and we had frequent telephone conversations. During one conversation in October of 2010, he reported that he had lung cancer that required hospice care. I called him days later, and his telephone was out of service. He had died.

PROLOGUE

November 1970, 1100 hours

I'M DRIVING DOWN THE WASHBOARD ROAD running next to the Rio Santo Tomás on the way back to our camp at Arboleda de los Robles, spacing out on Baja's bright blue sky and the late morning sun flashing through the leaves and branches of the gnarly oaks and brilliant yellow-green willows and sycamores that line the road . . .

"Jesus, Memo, slow down! Are you trying to get us killed after all we've been through?"

Jack's voice snaps me back. I smell the fish and saltwater from our trip to the coast. I muscle the FJ40 Land Cruiser around a sharp curve just a centimeter clear of a pickup full of pigs and chickens. I glance in the rearview mirror and see nothing but dust.

Jack white-knuckles the door handle in case I change my mind and drive us into the next oncoming vehicle. "What's going on, man? You haven't said a word since La Bocana."

I take a last drag on my Camel, flick it out the window, and keep my eyes on the road.

"You're an asshole. You came back in one piece, man. You're alive. We're in Mexico, man."

Jack laughs, doing his coyote howl. "*Me-hi-co! Me-hi-co!* Let's eat." He points up the road.

“Right.” I slam on the brakes and jerk the rig to a stop in front of a rustic bleached-wood shack. A hand-lettered sign across the door says *Refrescos*, soft drinks. Maybe they have some ice that has been trucked in for cold beer.

I punch Jack in the shoulder and manage to rough a smile. “Time for Carta Blanca!”

We jump out of the truck and wander over to an open fire, where two little, brown leathery-skinned old women are squatting, cooking tortillas on a flat iron plate. They glance up at us. Little smiles. I smell hot cornmeal and burning oak. This really is heaven. What the hell is wrong with me?

Jack says, “I’ll get a six-pack and see if they’ll make us some chicken tacos.” We head for the shack. Half a dozen chickens jump out of our way, squawking. I hear the sadness and grief-filled, scratchy old recording of Lola Beltrán from inside the shack, singing *El Crucifijo de Piedra*, the crucifix of stone. I still feel twitchy, but yeah, it’s good to be here.

“Al contemplar mi tristeza—” To contemplate my sadness.

Then something flashes in front of my eyes—there and gone—and the music is washed out by the rush of blood from my head to my heart. My eyes are popping wide to take everything in, and I see a dark, scrawny guy come stumbling quickly out of the shack, carrying a rusty old rifle. Is it like the weapon I’d seen once before on a Mexican soldier? The Heckler & Koch G3 seems to glow, growing larger as my heart thrashes in my chest—shit oh shit, oh shit—the muscles in my arms and legs vibrating like ten thousand watt electric tension coils as the dumb pendejo lifts the rifle to his shoulder. What the fuck is wrong with this guy, and click—CLICK . . .

I’m back in the jungle with the Hueys from hell tearing holes in my brain. I grab the rifle’s barrel, the cold steel burning my hand like napalm. I jerk it out of the pendejo’s hands, lift it up, rotate the butt down and back, and smash it forward full force, cracking his ribs.

That’s right, mother fucker, but why don’t you scream?

“Inocencio!”

At the edge of my vision I see a terrified young woman running out of the shack, carrying an infant, and behind her are two screaming children.

“Inocencio!”

The man moans, staggering toward her, gasping for breath.

But I'm not done.

Still holding the rifle in my left hand, my free hand swings around to drive a hammer-fist strike to the left side of his neck, his sweat and blood mixing with mine. Now the man is on the ground, where I want him, and his wife is running at me, pushing me—

“Memo! Shit. Get off him!”

I'm standing over the guy, poised to finish him off with another rifle butt to the skull. And I'm the one who's screaming now.

“You motherfuckin' gook!”

“*¡Párese, Señor, párese!*” More bodies are pouring out of the shack, the tortilla ladies are running around, the wife is shrieking, and the children are wailing.

“Memo!” Jack's voice is cutting through the rotor blades. For a split second my sanity flashes in, and I know how badly off I am. How did a guy who had every advantage—a charmed life—get this way?

He's grabbing me by the arm, trying to pull me off balance, pounding on my hand so I'll drop the rifle. But I can't let go.

“Memo, for God's sake, stop! We're in Mexico! Stop before you annihilate this guy!”

CHAPTER 1

LOS MILAGROS

Friday afternoon, October 1970

OUR CARAVAN DRIVES EAST on Mexican Highway 2. The stretch of human-chewing road parallels the United States-Mexican border between Tijuana and Mexicali. Kate and I are sandwiched between two vehicles. Chet and Suzanne are upfront. For a second I take one clinched hand off the steering wheel to rub the back of my neck. My eyes are pinned on their bumper moving back and forth through the twisty turns. I look at Kate, wanting to connect with her and then I turn away. I keep sight of Jack and Diane in the rearview mirror.

Chet is a different brand of harbinger than Jack. Jack is a man who gives a sensation of providence.

Chet and I drive FJ-40 Land Cruisers. Good for what's ahead. Chet's rig has off-road modifications and a powerful winch to rescue him or anybody else from being stuck. Good rig. Good setup for handling the rugged Mexican backcountry, and it's sardonic he has the best rig, but among us Chet has the most misdirected touch on salvaging himself from his war traumas.

Jack's air cooled rear engine VW camper van leverages against the rough roads—the nemesis of a city vehicle—and the desert terrain to come. Jack was inextricably snared by treating the grisly wounds and dismemberment and witnessed incalculable deaths that would make any other man permanently numb.

The caravan snakes through the curvy, potholed conduit between La Hechicera and La Rumarosa, headed via the mountains to an abrupt descent leading to the Laguna Salada desert. We'll travel off-road to the south once we reach the desert plain. The destination is an oasis with hot springs and desert palm trees, Cañón de la Virgen de Guadalupe.

Twisted grayish-green juniper trees lean down over the cliff edges around us. Kate points up and says, "I love the berries and cones. The trees are so sculptural."

"Yeah."

"The rock formations bring a prehistoric look to the moment. They're so cool."

"Sure are."

Kate turns towards me. Deep furrows between her eyebrows disturb her naturally angelic face. "Come on, Memo, you haven't spoken since we crossed the border at Tecate an hour ago."

"I hadn't noticed."

"You're in your element. It's Mexico." She raises her hands and lets them fall back down in her lap. Her tresses drape across her left eye, and the sunlight through the rear window catches the delicate wispy highlights in her hair. "Think of everything your mother has done to make you love Mexico. You should be happy to be here."

I can't stand Kate's pressure. I grip the wheel. She needs to let-up. The white of my knuckles stands out against the flesh color of my hand.

"Yeah, I know I should be happy."

"Is it about being down here with Chet and Jack?"

Her pestering questions started to annoy me, like a gnat hovering in front of my eyes. "I don't know." My lips press together to make what feels like a white slash.

"Memo, you're stonewalling me." She fidgets and twists her wedding ring around her finger.

"I swear to God, I don't mean to," my voice is a pressured knot.

Kate grimaces and shakes her head. "I know you don't mean to."

I glance at her. Kate's eyes are wide. Her chin pushes up, turning her mouth into a frown. I remember her looking this way when we found out I was going to war. "So what do you want me to say?"

“It’s not that I want you to say anything in particular. I just want you to say something.” Kate draws in a full-size breath. She lets it go. “Jesus, you’re like my father. He didn’t talk either. Or he didn’t talk because he wasn’t around. How do you think that makes me feel?” She tugs at her collar.

I try to frame a smile, like my old charming self. “Would it do any good to call you Sweet Cakes?” I take a fleeting look at Kate.

A flash comes across her face. Charm does the trick. Her face softens. Then the attempt to win over Kate wears off. She says, “No Sweet Cakes stuff. And don’t try the thing with the bedroom baby blues, either.” Kate gets serious. “That Sweet Cakes stunt worked on me for two seconds, just like when you used it in France, until—”

“Okay. But I am at a loss.” I jerk back having trouble being articulate.

Kate looks straight ahead. “Yeah, I believe you.”

A huge, ear-splittingly loud, old truck—no muffler—going in the opposite direction drifts over to our side of the road. I swerve off the pavement, hitting the dirt with the two right tires. “¡*Que pelotudo!*”

I immediately pull our rig back. This is a piece of shit potholed road. The truck almost clips Chet’s rig. It misses Jack’s van.

Kate pants. She looks like she’s trying to pull herself together from the fright of nearly getting axed. “What?”

“Hm? *Que pelotudo* means, ‘What an idiot.’”

“That was really scary!” She has an incredulous dazed look.

I snap back from the shock of almost getting nailed. “No big thing.”

Kate raises her eyebrows. “That’s what I mean.” She gives me a glassy stare.

“Huh? You’re talking over my head.” My words have a hard choppy sound.

“You were jazzed the first couple of days you were back. Then something curiously weird happened.” Kate cocks her head. “Like your brain checked-out, but you left your body behind.”

I hear Kate talking, but I don’t know what she’s saying.

She keeps it up. “Take right now. You get pumped up. Guy’s an idiot! But then you go flat. It’s no big deal. What’s going on with you?”

I haven’t been wearing my seatbelt since we left San Diego. I click it on. Adjust the rearview mirror. I see Jack and Diane’s image in the

rear view mirror. The sun is at my back, not in my eyes. There's no need for sunglasses, but I put on my Polaroids to hide-out.

There's a pressure behind my eyes. Tightness in my temples forces a couple bats of an eyelid. I say the first thing that floats to the surface of my torn-up mind. "I remember one morning, maybe three or four days after I got back. It was around eight in the morning. You were still asleep, and I was driving around aimlessly. Maybe I was trying to find something—didn't know what it was—maybe desperately trying to land back home—scratching for a sense of ballast. Don't know how I got there, but I was in a depressing, ticky-tacky housing tract. Probably the result of aimless wondering." I pause. Don't know if my answer makes any sense, or I'm a lunatic who is a tangential mess. I look at Kate for some sort of backup, but she just waits for me to finish. "All the houses looked the same, except for being painted dreadful dirty shades of yellow, pink or beige. There were beaten-to-shit cars parked in front of the houses. A guy wearing an old white t-shirt turned shabby gray had the hood of his car up, and his head was buried in the engine. His butt crack showed."

I glance at Kate, who's studying my lip movements. Despite my state I can't help but notice her refined cheekbones are smoothed over by softy textured fine skin. She blinks her stunning hazel eyes—now strained by my story.

The high desert terrain changes. We approach the descent. I'm too close to Chet and Suzanne's rig. I back off the gas and concentrate.

I grind my teeth, making an ache. My jaw loosens. "And then I saw some woman watering her front lawn in the fresh morning light. It was as though I were a million miles away, looking through a movie camera. She was a flabby, barefoot bitch wearing dingy shorts and a horizontally striped tank top. Udder-like tits falling over the woman's blubbery stomach. Her hair was up in gigantic pink curlers." I had felt unreal. The scene was surreal. What the hell did I come back to after being in Nam?

I take a quick look at Kate again. Her eyes are wide. I wonder if she is connecting with the story. And connecting with me trying to inch my way back to sanity.

We start to make the precipitous, sinuous four thousand-foot descent of Cuesta La Rumarosa at the eastern edge of the Sierra de Juarez escarpment. We catch our first glimpse of the dry Laguna

Salada in the San Felipe Desert valley floor below. The purplish mountainous tectonic lift of Sierra Cucapá is in the distant background. The vista is loaded with muted shadings, contours and dimensions. I can hold the view, almost touch it. And seeing the imposing impressiveness in front of me sets off the thought I should react to the panorama by feeling something or having a sensation. But I don't—just a blunted sense of oblivion. The next thought is I don't feel enough since I got back from war. Or really, I probably feel too much. Or I feel something, but I don't know what it is.

I restlessly drum the steering wheel with my fingers. "A few days earlier, I had been in the crawling anthill called Saigon, sweltering in its steamy rot. Thinking of that piglet watering her brown lawn... Was that why I went to war – to defend our country for a flabby utter-breasted woman so she could water her dead lawn? Fuck! I sure as shit hope those first few days aren't a preview of what's to come." I pound the steering wheel once with my fist.

"I've never, ever heard you sound so twisted up like this before." Kate looks straight ahead. The strain in her eyes release. Huge tears form and trickle down her blushed cheeks.

I can't deal with this shit right now. I tap the brake and steer the rig around the hairpin curves of one of the most dangerous roads in Mexico.

Kate's look bounces from place to place for a second. "I understand you pretty well," she goes on, her voice misted with tears. "You're not a bad person; you're a really good person. I love the charming side of you." Kate places a hand on my shoulder. "But where's that good person?"

I feel the skin bunch up around my eyes. "I don't know." I keep my eyes on the road.

"When are you going to find out?" She sounds strident.

"I really don't know." I feel helpless with Kate putting the squeeze on me. I wring the steering wheel like a rag.

Every two inches alongside the road we see decorated, white wooden crosses, memorializing people who have died on this stretch. Highway 2 is a statement of lost lives—a fucking cemetery. Chet and Suzanne stop at a pullout. The space is tight, not quite big enough for three vehicles. Our bumpers touch. The vehicles edge over the lip of the road. We unload our travel-cramped bodies out of the rigs.

Chet, Jack and I look over the side of the cliff. The three of us have hunched postures and drooping heads. We see a heap of auto carcasses deep in the canyon. I imagine people inside a car going over the deadly cliff, screaming in terror, propelled through space, not having enough time to say good-bye to the lives they are about to lose. They hit the bottom with the violent crash of twisting steel and flying parts—they're gone—silence. All the shit in my mind about abrupt death is a repetitive performance and I'd like the play to end.

Jack curls his lower lip. "Their poor families."

We three war veterans stand. Heads craned, looking in the canyon's deep crevasse. What do my buddies think? The same goddamn thing as me. People caught in a split second twist of fate leading to an unforeseen end.

Diane interrupts our transfixed daze. "Why'd we stop?"

Diane is a natural looking woman in a tight white T-shirt and blue chambray skirt and leather sandals. Smart and healthy, with brunette hair cut shoulder length. I remember Jack said Diane's a maternal type—likes to take care of people's complicated dilemmas and troubles. Her body is slender. Shapely breasts outlined by her jersey shirt. Diane's luminous blue eyes and perfect white teeth make her a picture of vivacity. Her high school students must love her. And then behind the radiance, I notice her eyes are bloodshot.

Suzanne had the idea to stop. "Isn't that amazing? Let's see how the Mexicans decorate the crosses." She tilts her head towards the roadside memorials.

The six of us stand in a semicircle in front of one cross.

Jack says, "Memo, you have encyclopedic Latin American know-how. I recognize the Virgin of Guadalupe painted on the glass cylinder, but what's the encased candle called?"

I get a kick out of my pal thinking I belong to some sliver of the Latino intelligentsia. "It's a *novena* candle." I tell Jack the candles are used for a mix of reasons. Here, to keep vigil over the spirit of someone who has died, to memorialize that person, to ward off evil, and to bring safety and peace to the dead person's soul. "The grieving person lights the novena candle to relieve their own suffering and help the dead person make a connection to God." I feel easygoing—despite the death subject—being unhooked from the squeezed conversation with Kate.

Suzanne has a slow smile that builds up. “Maybe we should light it.”

I faintly shake my head. “It belongs to somebody else’s soul.” The words come off my tongue like they were from the sensitivity of a person inside of me I don’t know very well. My second thought is she wants to light it to relieve Chet’s pangs of tortured agony.

Suzanne looks at me with one eye.

I study her. My eyes narrow. “How ’bout I get one for you to light?”

Diane stands close to Jack, wraps her arm around his arm, and pulls him close. “Memo, what’s the little metal charm? The ear?” She gazes at the symbol, her look becoming focused through her soporific reddened eyes.

Chet looks down the road and off into the distance. He stiffly stands, looking isolated within himself as if he’s cut-off from the rest of us. Chet taps his foot and crosses his arms.

Melancholic curiosity knits the rest of us together, letting the ache settle in of the infinite string of roadside crosses. And grasping how the Mexicans mourn and ritualize and manage death.

My spine straightens up, looking Diane directly in the eye. “The ear? It’s a *milagro*—‘miracle’ in English.” I tell her a *milagro* is for the supplicant requesting divine intervention; it symbolizes a specific pathway to the supernatural. “The ear *milagro* could have been placed here by someone who wants the dead person to finally hear the voice of God. Or maybe a spouse who is hoping at long last to be heard when he or she joins the departed in Heaven. Or maybe for the dead person to hear the spouse here on earth...who knows?” I slump and start to feel tight, a tingling sensation radiates across my shoulders and down my arms.

Their heads nod, as if they’re eavesdropping on a supernatural talisman.

My lips move without volition, and feel disconnected from the rest of me.

The questions continue to decode and fathom Mexican death rituals. Chet has dull eyes and blank features. Everyone else listens.

Suzanne crosses her arms and bends forward while observing the adorned white cross. “What is the little painting on the square piece of tin?”

Suzanne's and my eyes make a bridge. I regain connection with what I'm saying. I tell her it's an ex-voto, and sometimes things are so mystical in Mexico it's hard to follow the exact meaning in the mind of the person who painted it. "Strange and wonderful—all ex-voto art has a surreal quality and a feeling of suffering and a hope for wholeness with God, despite the ultimate outcome of healing or death."

Each of us ponders the iconic details of the makeshift altar and cross. I wonder what they're thinking.

Diane squints and considers my words. "Death and mysticism," she says like her consciousness is in some cosmic world. I study her bloodshot eyes. Diane is tripping on pot.

I shrug. "Mexico is a risky place—fewer chances for survival. So, down here, a cat has seven lives, not nine."

Jack twists his right hand around his left wrist. "I'm sick of risky places." He bites his lower lip and then says, "It's all too goddamn close."

There is a collective agitated hush. Everyone's eyes stick on Jack, except for Chet, who turns and looks over his left shoulder at the auto carcasses deep in the canyon. He pats his pocket like he's looking for something that's lost.

Suzanne lets go of a breath and breaks the silence. "So what do you think this ex-voto means, Memo?"

"What does it mean? This one has someone praying to an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe—probably praying for protection and a miracle." I rub my chin. "I'm not sure what an ex-voto is doing here. Ex-votos are used to wish a living person back to health or save someone from death. The ex-voto on a cross is for a person who is already dead." I shake my head. "I don't get it."

Kate jerks back, "Oh, my God!" She fights to catch her breath.

"Kate?" I pause. She's stunned. "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing. Absolutely nothing. Nothing." Color drains from her face.

Stupefied and stoned Diane examines Kate with her glazed over eyes.

Vertical creases form between Kate's eyes. Three sudden empty blinks are full of what she is not saying.

I'm left to guess what's wrong, but I don't have an answer.

Diane dazed, looks quizzicality at us. She draws in a breath, opens her mouth, and starts to speak, but Chet takes the moment. “Come on, let’s go.” He has a sharp tongue. “It’s okay if we go now.” He raises his eyebrows. “Let’s go.”

I’m relieved Chet finally said something. I need to leave, too. Enough of the death quiz.

We plunge down the abrupt zigzag mountainside road, taking one curve after the other. Every few seconds blazing taillights flash red as we go into a tight curve.

Kate braces herself with her hands on the dashboard. “You’re on top of Chet’s bumper,” she says intermixed with convulsive breaths. Kate jerks from side to side at each turn.

I ignore her, keep going. My eyes are glued to the road. I love the danger. The risk makes me relax from Kate bugging me. Scorching brakes smell singed. Transmissions whine. We muscle the steering wheels to push into and pull out of hairpin turns.

“After all those twisted wrecks and crosses we saw and—you’re scaring me!” Kate is shrieking.

I look in the rearview mirror. Jack is a couple of curves back.

“Memo, slow down!” shouts Kate.

My maniacal feeling subsides. I slow down.

Chet slows down.

“I didn’t realize—” My chest pounds. I loosen my grip on the steering wheel. I see Jack close in. Now he is three-car-lengths behind us. My pulse regains a regular beat.

Kate sits back in the seat. Her hands are on her thighs. She lets out a lung-full of air. “I want you to stop scaring me.”

CHAPTER 2

HERE'S THE JUMP

I DIDN'T EXPECT THINGS TO BE SUCH A MESS. I had an innocent, yet unsuspecting plan: to pick-up where Kate and I left off before my exodus for war. I counted the days and hours and minutes. Marking time to return to the solace of our marriage. In my guileless mind I crossed out any possibility of change between Kate and me.

A few sex-starved women who worked for the U.S. government on joint military-civilian missions tried to tug me in. I was randy right down to my bone marrow, but the true blue me came through in spite of those frantic moments of start and stop wavering. Kate—the permanent fixture in my mind—kept my ballast even and me going. She's the one I love. Her striking image in my mind was always the last answer.

There are the other parts of my war homecoming. I have the ambition that has turned into a longing to resume my architectural internship with Frank Gehry. And I'll cash-in on the GI Bill to get my masters in architecture at my alma mater, the University of Southern California. Some people say USC stand for the *University of Spoiled Children*. But that isn't the category I fall into. As an undergraduate I could've eased off, but I worked hard and was serious and had reserve and embraced modesty.

Anticipations have changed. And there's a reason. The basis is what happened during my absence. Now I'm daunted by the possibility

I've pissed away my marriage. There's an undying dark smear permeating the way I think and feel that forces the reckless ways I act.

Fleeing to remote Mexico is a way to be with my buddies who carry the same war in their minds. Taking our wives is a way to put them in the picture. The expedition down south is a stab at finding an unspecified thing to bring back a sensation of connection—from being disjointed to repositioning what's under the surface to find a sense of order. Though conceivably this solution is likely artless and unsophisticatedly green. But we'll take the plunge and give the jaunt a shot...the opportunity for an opening.

There are other reasons to break out. The escape to Mexico is to dodge the truth that I'm not getting any traction in my life back home. It's cheap, short-lived relief from the evil ricocheting from side-to-side in my mind. Part of my escapist plot is to find datura. It's a plant—a drug—that grows in Mexico. The shamans use it to treat demons and nightmares. It could be a panacea. Or it could be one more form of running away. Or a way to put back into place the splintered fragments of my soul.

OUR CARAVAN STRAIGHTENS OUT once we hit the pancake floor of the San Felipe Desert. After a couple of miles we see the K-28 highway marker that is our landmark. We turn south. Faint roads only slightly better than footpaths crisscross the desolate tract of the Laguna Salada desert. I point out what appears to be the best one to take. Maybe it's an incautious choice. The track could peter-out or go sideways. But shit, someone has to make a decision. Besides, if the pathway doesn't work we can realign our way to Cañón de la Virgen de Guadalupe.

The three-vehicle caravan continues for ten minutes. We stop at a cluster of acacia to double check our course. Smoke trees and creosote bushes give the desert setting an unexpected lush feeling.

Chet and I survey the mountain range to the west and south. He points out the location of Cañón Virgen de Guadalupe, more than 25 miles across the desert floor, at a southeastern leeward spot of the mountain range.

We stand separate from the group, next to the acacias. Chet's arm is parallel with the ground, his entire hand outstretched and palm

down in the direction of the canyon. “Memo, let’s draw an azimuthal equidistant projection for the shortest straight line to the canyon. We’ll need to figure the variations in our navigation path to keep on point.” He glances back at me and nods.

Chet speaks military navigation lingo in the tone of being out in the bush. The speak loops through us and makes a knot. We have strong eye contact. “Sure, Chet. I see the azimuth and image the navigational adjustments needed to arrive at the objective.” There’s a soothing familiar, brotherly comfortable feel to the talk. Somebody listening might think we sound technical or logical but not understand the unstated military bond. It’s just buddy talk. It’s a simple briefing to set up a path to reach the mark.

The two of us move further away from the others to get a better vantage point. I see a shiny black bird, with a long tail and a crest, and white on its wings. It flies into the acacia tree. The bird plucks berries from the parasitic mistletoe latched onto the acacia.

I squint. “Hey, Chet, look at the bird in the acacia tree. It’s a silky flycatcher.”

The bird drops to the ground and slurps liquid left by an unseasonable rainstorm a couple of days earlier. Juice fills the curvature of the fallen mistletoe leaves. The flycatcher looks ataxic—unable to control its muscle movements.

Chet wiggles his eyebrows. He nudges me. “Memo, it’s staggering around. Those berries were fermented in the rainwater. The bird’s loaded.” Chet arches his back and laughs.

I let out a quick breath. “No shit!”

A cowboy shirt with rolled-up sleeves, a leather vest, and jeans cover Chet’s lanky, muscular body. He wears beat-up brown cowboy boots. His long, blond streaked hair falls from underneath his well-used felt Stetson. Silver Navajo rings—one with turquoise inlay—are on each ring finger. He has an impeccably trimmed Vandyke covering his upper lip and chin.

Chet—who goes in and out of being in a distant place in his mind and emotionally remote—has unremitting and unbridled pieces crawling above and below his permeable skin’s surface. I know Chet’s fever. I feel it in him. And I feel it in myself. The regnant war trauma sickness says I drive you and I’m full of haunting surprises. Chet wastes himself with whatever anesthetic he can find to cool off his

twitchy mind. But getting loaded is like melting ice's impermanence that gives the illusion of relief, and the fever can fire-up at any tick of a second to trigger a revival of his satanic demons. We were chums in high school, and I know who he was then and how he is now.

I know a lot of things about Chet. Things he's told me outright and by inference that happened before the war and after he came home. The war bit lets me know I am completely like him. And our pasts before the war say I'm entirely different. Or I ascribe something in myself to him. And there's the confusing and distorted ways we hide to make our war-caused fever go away.

Chet puts his service medals out of sight. He finds they've been rearranged. Suzanne found them. She says nothing. Chet conceals his Silver Star and Purple Hearts, pretending his memories will go away. But they don't go away. I don't think he's ever considered getting rid of his medals. He can't. The medals are attached to fragments of knowing whether they are hidden or not. They're permanently burned into his chest's flesh.

Chet came back from war before me. I wrote him a letter while I was still in that hellhole. He sat on it. Months, maybe. He buried it. And then he had a vicious argument with Suzanne. Chet said the next day he found my letter on his dresser. Suzanne placed it there. He finally sent me a response.

Chet had a lucky break when he arrived at his war post. His military occupational specialty—his MOS—was infantry, coded 11B—*eleven bravo* it's called. Stateside, he's a mason. Being a mason turned into a magic trick. He was assigned to the Army Corps of Engineers. But there was extra duty. Night patrol. Chet went out with three other GIs. He was the only one to come back. Chet screened out what happened to the other soldiers. That's the way it is with Chet. I don't know what happened. You just know something noxiously injurious happened because of his fever.

Suffering like pariahs takes our voices away. We clam up about being veterans when we got home, driven by the disenfranchising antiwar sentiment. The impact of war gives us a removed sensation and the antiwar people's lack of acceptance and insight about the personal ravaging touch the war had on us makes us trapped in a cage looking out. We feel more isolated and detached, like pariahs.

“SO CHET.” I LOWER MY HEAD AND FLICKER MY EYES. “HAVE YOU ever heard of *nepenthe*?”

He wags his head back and forth. “No fuckin’ clue.” Chet hums. “But you’re asking about something that sounds like a drug, right?” His eyes widen.

I nod. “You’re clued in after all.” I tell Chet it’s a drug mentioned in Homer’s *Odyssey*. *Nepenthe*, which comes from Greek, literally means, *no grief, no sorrow*. The drug takes away anguish. Makes you forget the things you want to disremember.

Chet cocks his head and eyes me. “This is leading to something good, not just some dumb fuck mental exercise?” For this wink of an instant Chet has undiluted concentration.

“Let me finish the story.” I tell Chet *nepenthe* was given to Helen by an Egyptian queen to rid Helen of grief and sorrow. Helen’s intoxication allowed her to overlook the pain she wanted to cut out of her mind.

Chet puts his hands on his hips and laughs. “Yeah? You want us to drink fermented mistletoe berry juice so we can get loaded like the bird?”

I shrug and my lips draw out to a thin line. “No. Here’s the jump.” I tell him about the Piapia Amerindians who migrated back and forth over the Sierra Juarez. I sweep my finger from south to north, pointing out the mountain range to the west of us. “They used a hallucinogenic plant called *datura*.”

Chet makes a snorting sound. “*Datura* is like *nepenthe*?”

“Yeah, rid yourself of grief and sorrow—and maybe more than that.” I tell Chet the Piapia shamans took the drug in the belief their hallucinatory experiences were the gods using them as conduits to communicate with the indigenous people.

“Sounds like it could be a kick-ass high.” Chet’s words are a stoner’s muse. But his face is dead serious.

I lean forward. “You’ve seen the freaky looking petroglyph art up in one of the canyons near Guadalupe?”

“Sure.” The pivot of his exaggerated nod rocks his shoulders back and forth.

I tell Chet the shamans made the petroglyphs by scratching though the natural mineral coating—desert varnish—on the boulders and canyon walls. The petroglyphic figures are symbolic communi-

cations from the gods pipelined through the shamans. "I'm going up in the canyon with the petroglyphs and try to find—"

"Chet! Memo!" screams Suzanne. "Come on, let's go."

We're back at the rigs in a minute.

"What took you guys so long?"

"Directions can be complicated," snorts Chet.

"Yeah, we were sorting out the complexities of finding our way." I maintain a staid expression.

Suzanne looks askance, knowing how to read when bad boys have an agenda. She crooks her head. Her concentrated eyes narrow.

We get back in the vehicles. The course is fixed for Cañón Virgen de Guadalupe.

The sandy path beneath the Land Cruiser makes the ride seem to oscillate between rough and floating. The landscape is filled with bursage shrub and tamarisk salt cedar trees. I look at Kate, seeing the landscape blur past her through the passenger window. I turn back to keep my eyes on the dry sagebrush dotted laguna in front of us. "Kate, see that optical illusion? The mountains in the distance appear to be moving away instead of getting closer."

"I make it out." She clears her throat. "Life is full of what you see and don't see."

I stutter. "You're speaking in code. What do you mean?"

Kate looks straight ahead. A rough stretch of terrain radiates tiny jerking motions through her body. "Were you guys talking about drugs?"

Her hunch is uncanny. I tell her about the flycatcher, nepenthe and my plan to find some datura.

"Figures. Predictable, really. Chet likes to do drugs. And he likes to talk about doing drugs, if he is not loaded on drugs." At first Kate's voice has a loathsome resonance. And then her speech spikes up two octaves. Stiletto peaks punctuate each word. "Memo, I don't care if you take a drug if it helps get you back. I want you back." She sounds cavernous and needy. "I don't want somebody else in your body instead of you. So do whatever you have to do." Kate stops dead. She looks at me, the road vibrates her body back and forth in the passenger seat. "Do you still love me?" She turns her eyes back to the direction our path across the barren desert.

"I fell in love with you, Kate, and I have never fallen out of love with you."

"You love me...but can't show it." Kate's hands pull into white knuckled tight fists. She glances sideways. Her chin trembles.

Kate's acrimonious bitterness spills out, making her agitated. I say, "Look, if you're still thinking about what happened in France—well—I said I'm sorry. Give me a break. After all that wine I was totally trashed. Come on, anybody can do dumb shit things when you're plastered."

"It's not about punishing you. It's just—I can't get over it." Kate takes three heavy breaths. "Getting polluted isn't an alibi, so forget it." She looks at me. Her eyes are cold and hard. "There's nothing you can do or make up some bullshit thing to say to make-up for what happened. Your little romp."

I wince and push my hand into my breastbone. "Come on. It was a bad choice. I was skunk drunk."

"It was stupid."

"That's what I just said."

"Memo, goddamn it, don't be cute when I'm pissed off." Kate crosses her arms. Her lower lip curls in to a little girl pout.

I clear my throat. "Look, nothing happened." My head shakes. "And I'm sorry that I tried to pull you into it." I hesitate and then nod. "The reason I got so blotto was...because I wanted to get in trouble. Get some release because of all the bullshit I carry inside and it's tiring holding on by the slightest piece of unraveling twine."

"Let me be." She sniffs. "Talk about something else."

"Yeah. I guess. Okay." I mull over what happened in France for a couple of minutes. Then try to unhook myself from Kate's upset. Rattled, I lower my eyebrows and a distracted feeling seeps in—a curiosity—why was Kate taken aback by the ex-voto laden cross? "Kate, why did you flinch and gasp when we stood by the crosses, and I explained the rituals the Mexicans used to memorialize the people killed on the highway?"

She coughs. "What? You're trying to change the subject so I'm not so torn up right now about your frolicking in France?"

I blink and then look wide-eyed. "You're right. Distract you from being cross and huffy with me. But I also want to know what caused you to recoil the way you did."

“Oh. That?” Kate turns pale. She looks taxed. “You said the ex-voto was for a dead person. Your words triggered a memory of a dream I had a couple of days ago.” Kate hangs on for ten seconds. “I wasn’t going to tell you about the dream. Just wanted to forget it.”

I grind my teeth. “I try to erase my dreams, too.”

She doesn’t seem to hear what I said. “Okay, I’ll tell you.” She spins through the dream like a movie reel. Kate says she goes to the closet at our beach house. She opens it. She sees me in the closet, dressed in my Army olive drab jungle fatigues, jungle boots, black captain’s bars embroidered patch sewn on the right side of my collar, and infantry rifles on the left. I’m wearing a helmet. I’m a dead man wearing a helmet with captain’s bars on its cloth cover. Leathery black skin is pulled tightly over a bony skull of a face. “It scares the shit out of me. Your eyes are glowing against your drawn face like two burning sapphires; you’re both alive person and dead... Then ‘already dead’ pops out of your mouth up on the grade.”

A trapped feeling abruptly scours me. The Spanish word *esposas*—it means both wives and handcuffs—detonates in my head. I’m thrown off balance, staggering to the edge of careening directionless. I can’t escape.

For a fitting reason my mind shifts to a scrap of thought about the San Andreas Fault. The fault line can’t be seen. It’s just there. The fault disappears below the alluvium in the Salton Sea to the north and continues south. It subterraneously runs close and beneath us. In eons of geologic time the fault caused Baja and mainland Mexico to split. This land, once one, becomes two and fills in with water, creating the Gulf of California.

That’s us. The distance is like a gulf and a vast sea separate Kate and me. The span between us is one chunk. Unraveling our split’s agonizing wounds, we’re like a fleshy ripped fabric filled-in with infection, pus and ooze.

Kate spews an exaggerated sigh. “Memo...Memo, aren’t you going to say anything?”

“Look, I’m trying to recuperate from your goddamn hallucinatory nightmare. I’m losing ground trying to get myself reeled in, but constantly get dragged back to the past. But for chrissake, what can I say? Your bullshit wicked dream blows me away.”

“Why? Because it’s the straight scoop.”

“Realism. That’s it, realism. It’s too fuckin’ much.”

“You’re going to have to tell me what happened.”

“You’re not ready for it.”

“Are you shitting me? You’re the one who’s not ready.”

I feel the angst of my emotionally choked voice. “I’m such a fuckin’ wreck; I’ll never be ready to—”

Kate fans herself with an open hand. “Okay. Well, listen, then.”

I feel overheated and grip the steering wheel, trying to pay attention.

The dust from Chet’s rig gusts over us. Jack’s van is hazy image through the clouds of dust in my rearview mirror.

Kate says, “When we got together in college the only thing in the world that mattered was us—not the draft, not the strain of you leaving, not military training, not your decision to go to Officers Candidate School—OCS—not fears about being deployed to Vietnam, and not me being a military wife stuck in the States, waiting for the doorbell to ring with a message that you were wounded or dead. I want our life back. I want you back.”

I grimace. “I want our lives back too.” My voice is uncertain. “A timetable doesn’t exist.”

Kate rubs her temples with her fingertips. “So you want me to be patient after I’ve been tolerant for the past three years? While you were in Vietnam all I did was plan for you to come home, work, come home paint, go back to work, come home and paint some more. Yeah, I was totally turned on to developing my art—kept me alive. But everything else was a vacuous abyss.”

Kate looks out the passenger door window. She turns back to me, stretching out her spite. “I ran everything while you were gone. The house, all our business. Managing, saving the money you sent. Arranging our European trip.” She hits her thigh with her fist. “Now I want you to help me and be a part of things. But you feel like a guest who has stayed too long—a permanent stranger. I keep running everything because the way you deal with stuff is so black and white and calculated like a military mission. Or else you’re bullshitting—shooting the breeze—telling stories with your surfing buddies. I’m not sure if I even want you to help me anymore.”

“You want me to help you. And you don’t want me to help you.” There’s a fluttery sensation in my stomach. “Kate, you are confusing the hell out of me.”

Kate’s body posture collapses. “Well, how do you think it feels like for me?”

I shrug and purse my lips. My grip on feeling tied to Kate and everything else feels like it’s slipping away. I scratch for one piece of empathic connection. “You must feel confused.”

Kate’s lower eyelids swell with tears. “Yeah. I wish you’d be with me the way you are with our black lab, Shadow Facts. Funny, isn’t it? You connect with the pooch. You’re at home with her. With me, you’re present and absent at the same time, but with that animal you’re the old Memo.”

My voice feels unsteady. “Shadow Facts is easy. There are no conditions with her. The longer I’m away during the day, the happier she is to see me.” I force a swallow. “The longer I stay away, the more upset you become.”

“Yeah, I know, she wags her tail—not exactly what I do.” Kate gazes straight ahead. Nothing falls across her face but a vacant stare.

There’s no talking to Kate now. And I get she’s scared. Kate’s still the frightened kid whose daddy left her. Nobody is going to undo the divorce wedge set in her life when her parents called it quits and right now her old kid pain complicates the hell out of our crisis. Her mom was so wounded she slimly attended to Kate’s damage. And if her mom had been one hundred percent, it wouldn’t have been enough.

I was supposed to be safe. Secure. And now, I’m nothing more predictable than a shake of the hand and roll of the dice. I could be right or wrong. But I have a hunch she feels I’ve abandoned her—just like her dad—even though I’m right here sitting next to her. Maybe it would be easier if I was just gone, rather than being a shell-shocked phantom person who makes Kate’s life a daunting mess.

She grasps the vehicle’s armrest. “Memo, aren’t we going faster?”

My mind filters back to being contrite and my heartfelt regret. Kate didn’t care I was repentant. I pushed our taxed and antagonized marriage over the edge and into a deep chaotic chasm by the disastrous stunt in France. I’d like to find an excuse or justification or some way to defend myself for what happened. I can’t.

My head jerks back. “Oh yeah. I didn’t notice.” I look in the rearview mirror. The outline of Jack and Diane’s dust enveloped van can barely be seen.

Kate squints. “Look, Chet is speeding away from us.”

I glance at the speedometer. “I’d better slow it down. Wow, look, he’s really movin’ out—our speed is slightly more than seventy. We’ll let him go. Besides, we’ve got to stay connected with Jack to make sure he doesn’t get lost.”

Kate shakes her head. “Yeah, it’s not safe. It’s a good thing Jack is a doc in case Chet crashes. Poor Suzanne.”

My eyes widen. “It’s always good to have Jack along.” Then I catch the reference. “Poor Suzanne? Why—”

“Why what? I’m focused on the wrong person? Suzanne? You’re right.” Kate turns her head towards me. “Look. Everything’s changed. I should be saying poor me?” She shakes her head. “Well, I’m not going to say poor me. Even with all the bullshit you’ve subjected me to and the fallout between us. I’m saying no to being pitiful.”

Self-abasement sets in. I have to do something to turn around what’s happening with Kate. “Tell you what. I’ll call Frank Gehry when we get home. See if I can get my internship back. Check-out the USC graduate school.” I take a quick deep breath. “Look, I’ll get back on track.”

“Oh yeah?” Kate sits stiffly. “So when are you going to call him, Memo? I’m turning darker shades of blue waiting for you.” The blankness of Kate’s face looks as if the glue between us doesn’t make a seal.

A tightening in my chest makes an imploding collapsed sensation; like Kate stunned my heart and now it has gone into paralysis. What caused her to do it? Me.