

ANTHONY BARBERA

THE FIRST RAINS OF OCTOBER

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2009

Graduation Night—June 4, 1965

When August St. Claire ran off that cliff she dropped like a rock. True, she was running and her legs kept kicking in the air—but then gravity yanked on her ankles. There was simply no way to tell when she'd hit. It was pitch black and foggy, all she could see were her feet descending ahead of her. She instantly grasped the situation; she didn't flail or flap her arms. Instead, she pressed them tightly to her sides, the way young girls do when they jump into a freezing swimming pool. August realized in that split second that being an arrow was her best chance for survival. If she didn't shatter on the rocks below first, if somehow she miraculously missed all the craggy spikes and plunged into that deep hole, deep enough to envelope her long fall from the cliff above—then she might live. That's when she screamed.

August didn't have time to be afraid or to remember that she was naked, her underwear clenched tightly in her right fist. There wasn't even time to review her life and remember all those thankful moments you never wish to forget. She grabbed deep breaths hurriedly and exhaled quickly, deciding to fill up with as much air as she possibly could. Then she whimpered to herself and waited.

As she pierced the water-line the foam looked almost soft. And as she descended, the sea closed taut against her skin and it hugged her so tightly that for just a sliver of time the water

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felt warm—a breath later, stinging ice pricked her skin. She'd never felt cold like this in her life. Like a bullet, she pierced deeper and darker. And she cried.

Descending, August had moments to think and was relieved that she hadn't met her death on the rocks above. If she'd had clothes on she'd have been dragged down forever. Even now, somehow her mind gripped the truth; if she didn't stop this descent, she'd never make it back to the surface. So she began flapping her arms and ratcheted her kicking so that a little bit at a time she slowed her descent. Except after a few more seconds she realized in the depths of her soul that it wasn't fast enough; she couldn't stop the descent quickly enough. She wasn't going to be able to slow herself from the long fall. August was going to die down here, in this dark, empty, numbness.

TWO

10 Years Later—Sunday Oct 12, 1975

We must have been doing seventy-five at least—my sister Merrily driving, ripping down California Highway One, slick from the rain and fog of the night before. We could hear the water splattering against the floorboards of the floating Lincoln, the music, Low Rider by War, blaring on the cassette player and us just rocking and ripping along.

My sister was twenty-five and crazy, and I must have been even crazier on account of us going to pick up Clay Moorehouse from San Quentin State Prison. I'm two years older than Merrily, her older brother—it makes you wonder, huh?

Our car, the Lincoln, was a '71 and smooth. Lincolns were like that then: broad and buttery—a gentle sway to 'em. She'd been my father's pride and joy, his trophy for years of hard work and no vacations. That's dairy farming for you. He died last year, so my sister and I took the Lincoln whenever we had to travel out from the farm; otherwise it was the pickup, a '57 GMC, mottled and rusty.

"Take a little trip—take a little trip—take a little trip with me," was rattling through the speakers. We were late and driving way too fast for the coast road, cutting inland on highway one through the wooded interior for stretches and then winding back, barely straddling the cliff-line overlooking

the foaming royal-blue ocean below, speeding toward San Quentin.

That Sunday morning we were in a big rush to pick up Clay Moorehouse, the con man. Merrily had been writing him on and off in prison, keeping in contact. She was nuts. He'd been in San Quentin for second-degree murder since 1965, almost ten years, and now he was getting out on parole. Anyway, my sister Merrily goes and tells Clay, she'll pick him up and he can stay on our farm for a while. I'm not kidding—I was really pissed off. According to her, he'd been a model prisoner. I knew she'd been sneaking to the prison to see him after her boyfriend Brice Compton dumped her, but I never thought the guy would get out of prison that soon. But Governor Jerry Brown was letting everyone, except the worst offenders, out early because the prisons were overcrowded. So now Clay Moorehouse, who'd thrown his girlfriend off a cliff into the ocean, was getting out early.

With my elbow propped on the windowsill I couldn't hold back. Merrily and I were hassling each other.

"So, Merrily, you told him he could work for us—didn't you?"

"Bull crap, Seth!" She dropped her jaw and turned toward me. "I didn't tell him that. I told him he could stay with us for a couple of days. That's all!"

I had my arm hanging out the window and slammed my hand against the side of the car. "Why didn't you ask me first?"

"Lay off, Seth. I mean it. I don't have to ask your permission for every stinking thing I do."

"It's not just about you, Sis; that's my whole point. You don't see me making family decisions without consulting you first—not since Dad died."

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Merrily was a lot like our father: leggy, straight and deliberate. She fit tight in Levi's and loved cowboy boots. At twenty-five, guys found her attractive. Her swirling hair atop her head was the color of mom's dark-rum cake, auburn with a golden layer twisted through the middle.

She slapped my chest, smiling. "Yeah, but that's dairy business; this is personal." She said it as she tightened her grip on the wheel.

The highway was still wet, and the Eucalyptus trees reaching high formed a long dappled tunnel beneath. Merrily turned back at me and shook her head. I glanced out the side mirror and watched the ruddy leaves, like thousands of barbecued potato chips, flutter in our wake, making a crispy sound in the wind. Then we sliced right through Loss Landing.

"Will you please slow down, Merrily. You're going to get a ticket."

Taught against the Pacific Ocean, most of Loss Landing can't be seen from the two-lane road, so driving through town you really have to slow down or you won't notice Lumbridge's Dairyman's Feed or Denali's Fine Italian Dinners, either. I bent around nervously as we flew past Fallon High School, looking for a Highway Patrol car camouflaged behind the trees.

"Why do you think I'd say that to Clay, about working for us? Why do you assume that, Seth?"

"Come on Merrily, he grew up on a farm, that's why. I know we need help, but you didn't ask me first—that's the problem."

Merrily stomped her boot on the gas pedal. "All I'm saying, Seth, is that Clay's changed. He's not the same person he was in high school, like you're not and I'm not."

I thought about that for about a half second and laughed. “Hey, Merrily—I didn’t push my girlfriend off a cliff, okay. It’s not the same thing at all. Come on! Just because a bunch of psychiatrists say someone’s rehabilitated doesn’t mean it’s true. That’s horse shit.”

“I still don’t believe he did it, Seth!”

Leaving the Pacific Ocean, heading east toward Petaluma, the countryside becomes hilly and wide-open, emerald in the springtime and wheat colored in the fall. Dairy and beef cattle, sheep and horses speckle the countryside separated by boulder outcrops and long divisions of Eucalyptus trees, the farms separated one from another on quilt-like sections of open grasslands. Then we passed Clay’s dad’s farm.

The problem with all of this was that Clay and I had been best friends as kids. When I was a boy and I’d spend the night at Clay’s farm, I would share in his chores. When he stayed at our farm, it was the same for him. In high school, Clay was distant with most guys, but that wasn’t true of the girls. At that time Merrily was only a sophomore, so I don’t think there was any interest there. But girls called him at night; he’d never admit it though. I’d catch bits and pieces walking with him by their lockers at school and see their roving eyes as we hustled down the hallway. Of course, Clay had movie-star good looks. Heck, I’m not sure he even realized just how handsome he was. When he was a sophomore, I caught a senior-girl slip a note into his jeans pocket as he slammed his locker door. He got all embarrassed and denied it, but I saw him with her later. It didn’t matter to me.

Merrily was really close with our father Vernon. When he died, it was sudden and untimely. We both figured Pop would

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live forever. We have aunts and uncles on my mother's side, but they don't live around here so as far as family is concerned, it's really the two of us now. But boy, did Pop love country-western music.

My sister Merrily, she is a nut for R&B and Blues, like Sly and the Family Stone and B.B. King and she just loves War. But then she also liked Tammy Wynette and that cowboy hippie, Willie Nelson. She must have gotten that from our dad.

When she smiles, people are taken by the dimples on each side of her mouth and the light brown freckles. Merrily is simply happy to be female—as if it is the most wonderful ideal in the entire world, to be a woman. She is easygoing, especially with men—at peace with life. And like our mother Arabella, somehow, Merrily is self-assured by way of an enriched sense of herself. But by God, like our mother, Merrily is a stickler for detail, especially the ones that interest her.

Merrily brushed the same kind of thick hair as my mother's back from her face and shoved a James Brown cassette into the eight-track. "I feel *good!*" blared out of the torn right speaker.

Our mother Arabella died when I was only sixteen, still in high school. Mom was the sweetest of women and of good report in our community. German, she was resolute. When it came to gossip, even as a kid, if you had an unfavorable tale to tell concerning a pal, my mother would insist you take it up directly with that very person, and not circumvent the order of life, at least until a respectable outcome was achieved. As things stood, within Arabella Northrup's constellation of ideals, respectable was always achievable, regardless of the situation. She and Merrily were almost identical in height. Mother was fair skinned and apt to pile her hair atop her head, with white teeth and brown sparkling eyes just like Merrily. I remember

when she got angry she'd stand straight up, stick her chest way out and talk steadily and forcefully, which to me was how I imagined Germans to be: strong willed.

Merrily was grimacing. She'd do the same thing before she really blew up. "He just needs a place to crash for a few days, Seth. That's it. And remember, his parents milked more cows than we ever did. Do you know that? And not just Holsteins, either. They raised hogs over there, as well."

"Merrily, the guy's been in prison, for what, almost ten years? Who cares? What makes you think he even wants to work on a farm, anyway?"

"Seth Northup, you are a hypocrite. He knows more about farming than you do. Besides, why is it that people are so damn judgmental? They think they know everything about a person. It's sickening."

"Hey look, we're talking about a murder, not a traffic ticket. What the hell is wrong with you? He shouldn't be out of jail anyway—not for second degree murder! The more I think about it, Merrily, the more I hate this. A couple days—that's it, then he finds his own place."

The thought of Clay getting out of prison and the two of them hooking-up—well, I didn't want this guy anywhere near my sister, but that wasn't going to stop her. So, that's why I went with her to pick Clay up at San Quentin. At least I could keep an eye on her. Besides, she'd have gone anyway.

THREE

Hallowed Land

When we pulled into the parking lot at San Quentin State Prison and rolled around the circular driveway, I spotted him right off the bat. They'd let him grow his hair; it was almost shoulder-length and wavy, like a girl's, but parted down the middle. Clay was 6'2", almost as tall as I am, but he was the opposite in bulk. He was thin and muscular; I was taller and bigger but not so defined, just strong.

Merrily drooled, "Oh my gosh—he didn't look like that in high school..."

"What did you think he'd look like, Merrily? He's been working out with weights. What else is there to do...?"

I've got to say, he did look pretty ripped. Muscular and lean, he had a noticeable six-pack beneath his tee shirt. His new Levi's were the color you can't mistake for anything other than new jeans. He stood up from the bench pushing his hair back as we pulled around to the bus stop. Merrily slammed on the emergency brake and jumped out of the car, running and throwing her arms around his neck, kissing him. He picked up his small black duffel bag and walked toward the car wrapping his arm around Merrily's waist. His biceps were a lot bigger than in high school. What a racket! You go to prison for ten years and come out looking like a magazine bodybuilder, while you're supposed to be doing time. I climbed into the driver's

seat. Coming up to my window, holding Merrily's hand, he nodded as if he'd seen me just the other day.

"What's up Seth?" he grinned.

I'd known Clay Moorehouse about as well as anyone. But we weren't friends now, and I didn't like her kissing all over him. Clay was nineteen when he entered San Quentin. I remember that day clearly. On the high school football team Clay possessed tremendous speed, quickness and lean strength. He didn't look like he'd lost any of it either. I'd been a tight end, a thick lineman and tough enough to catch a pass right down the middle of the field and take a hit.

Clay reached his hand through the open window, with his thumb up, the brother's shake. "Long-time no see, man."

"You look good, Clay. Hop in—let's get out of here while we can."

"No shit," he said, throwing his bag into the back seat as Merrily told him to go ahead and ride shotgun.

If you pass through the town of Loss Landing going west and continue north along Highway One for three and a half miles (still a simple two-lane highway), just as you come over a big rise, on the right, you can see down onto our property. Our farm sits in a valley and stretches a good way east, fading most days into a blur of turquoise sky and dry hazel grass. In the foreground, scattered across the landscape, graze spotted Holstein cows, like so many dots against the landscape, heads down chewing steadily and most facing in the same direction. We turned onto our gravel road, drove past the Northrup's Dairy sign, crunching and winding our way down to our dairy.

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As we got closer to the house I thought about where we would put Clay. We had a separate cottage down near the milking barn, kind of a rustic duplex type deal, not the nicest quarters, but he wasn't staying in the house.

"So Clay, we have a ranch hands house over by the milking barn. We'll put your stuff over there after awhile."

Merrily squirmed in the back seat. "I thought he could stay in the big house, Seth..."

I turned to her and I must have been shooting darts because right away she caught on. "Oh that's right. He wouldn't be happy in Dad and Mom's room." She leaned forward to Clay in the front seat. "I think I told you Dad passed away a few months ago."

"Hey no, Clay, the guest house is great. I didn't expect anything else. Your mother sure was a special person. I remember that. I don't mean to be any bother to you two. I'm sure I can get plenty of work done to help you out, Seth. Sorry about your pop."

"Well, we'll see how things shake out. We got a lot of girls out here now."

After Mom died and I graduated from Fallon High School, I attended U.C. Davis, majoring in geology and natural history. Following graduation, I began work for Hecla Mining Company in Nevada. At the time dad died, we were busy in exploration throughout Nevada and Arizona. I was doing well, with a good salary and additional overtime. But when Pop died it was unexpected. The man was never sick, not that I recall, and he never went to the doctor, which he claimed was the safest bet.

"How many acres you got now, Seth?" Clay asked, lighting a smoke.

“We’ve got 187 acres, between the bottomland along the hollow and the plateau above.”

“Don’t owe a thing to anybody neither,” Merrily volunteered. “Pop saw to that.”

As you pull up to the house, you notice that all our buildings are tucked up close against the base of a sheer rock wall, rising hundreds of feet into the air. It becomes a plateau above, running west for almost an eighth of a mile, adjoining McCall’s property. So from the well-watered plateau above our farm, the slope glides gently downward, forest-green and lush most of the year. On the floor, as our valley bends to the left, the plateau from above converges with the creek where it creates a soft alluvial fan.

The farmhouse is set back from the cliff just far enough to avoid falling rock. Fortunately that big cliff shields our house from some of the nasty westerly winds and the worst of the winter storms. Kitty-corner and about forty yards to the east is the barn and the milking stalls. To the north of the house, flowing through the middle of our property and past our porch, Stemple Creek runs full, swelling to a small river during the winter. The creek divides two grassy hillsides and on the far side, about a hundred sheep graze the short green stubble. Leaving our property, Stemple Creek meanders west under the two lane highway and then south into Loss Landing and finally out to Tomales Bay.

As we climbed out, I asked Clay to leave his bag on the front porch, and I’d show him where he could bunk. The two went into the living room. I had to make a phone call and when I came out of the kitchen with three sixteen-ounce Coors’ beers, just trying to be hospitable, the two had vanished. The screen door slammed behind me as I nudged my way out and

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stood on the porch—beer still in hand. They'd disappeared, somewhere.

Merrily was supposedly still pining over a hurtful relationship she'd suffered. She'd been engaged to marry this fellow from Compton, Brice Nabone. They'd been going together for three years when all of a sudden he up and joins the Marines. Nobody could figure. So I guess that's when Merrily began corresponding with Clay. Who knows, people do funny things when they get hurt. The wrong love can knock the sense right out of you, and it always seems we fall for the wrong person. Then it becomes a mismatch of standards and ideals and all of a sudden you exhibit little or no self control. But don't try to tell that to the one in love. Forget it, they're blind. Merrily told me at some point that she was writing to Clay. I thought it was asinine, but I figured he'd never get out of prison anyway and it would be a good distraction. Then Clay gets released from San Quentin early. I don't believe any of us thought that would happen.

Well, it didn't take me long to figure out where they'd gone and once I knew, I wished I hadn't. As I approached the barn, from above in the loft, I could hear them. So I decided to walk out to the near pasture. We have a windmill over there that waters our young heifers. I like to pasture them close, so I can keep an eye on 'em. They're like kids to us, somehow.

I was only partly concentrating on what I was doing, getting fumed up and considering that I might go into the barn and have at it with Clay. But first I checked the water troughs and the feed box. Sitting myself down on the fence, two of my younger "girls" strolled over and nudged their noses into my jacket. Anyway, the only problem with punching out Clay was

that my sister thought this was all okay—she'd probably never forgive me and she was twenty-five years old—not a kid.

Every day I look over the herd, like my father did whenever I'd go out with him, watching for any that are limping, acting weak, or have any sign of cancer eye. There is a common sense approach to dairy farming which in our family fathers pass on to their sons. Of course, moms and daughters do the same, in their own domain. At any rate, my pop would have walked right into that barn, climbed the ladder to the hay loft and pushed Clay right down onto the floor and then thrown him out of the barn. I jumped down and headed for the barn.

My father Vernon was born in our ranch house and lived there his entire life. His Grandfather Aden had completely demolished the house his Granddad Miles had built back in the mid 1800's and on the exact spot, our present ranch house still sits. I can still remember Great Grandpa Aden, vaguely. He died when I was only five.

Pop was quirky about some things. He maintained that many more farmers died *after* visiting a doctor than those who never visited a doctor their entire life. He could name names, too. Vernon Northup believed doctors were downright dangerous. Then one day Pop had a heart attack out on the baling tractor. Doctor Martin said there was nothing we could have done anyway. They found him late in the afternoon, Pop hunched over still seated on the tractor, hands still gripping the wheel, having run right down a shallow grade and lodged at the river's edge in the mud. Most of the nearby herd were clustered around him, some watching, others chewing and maybe waiting and hoping he'd wake up. You might think that cows are dim-witted, but they know who's taking care of them and are a lot more conscious than you might think. At least Pop didn't drive off some bluff or something and then

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have the tractor land on top of him, like what happened to Jake McClure's pop when I was a kid. I think pop died somewhat peaceably. I hope so. Doctor or no doctor.

After my father died, my sis and I both agreed that it had taken a steely resolve over too many years—generations really, to let the Northrup's Dairy Farm go to seed, or worse, get sold off. So I came back. It was not to be permanent. Merrily and I both agreed on that.

By the time I got to the barn I was pretty steamed and I yanked the doors open and yelled up at them. "You two get the hell out of this barn!" No answer. I yelled again and when there was no answer the second time. I ran toward the house. The truck was gone and so were they. I wasn't Merrily's pop, but it bugged the heck out of me that she was so loose with Clay. They'd never conclusively proven that Clay pushed August off that cliff. No one actually saw him do it, but he was the only one up there and she sure as heck didn't push herself off. Twelve jurors had no problem with the evidence; it was unanimous. Merrily could be so shortsighted at times.