

THE CURVE OF THE EARTH

by

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In the darkness of the motel room he sat in the chair, lit a cigarette and watched the headlights from the highway come through the curtains like a searchlight. In the beam he could see the girl's hair fanned out on the pillow above her head, one breast out from under the sheet, Lee's arm thrown across her shoulder. He watched them in the rising and falling glow of his cigarette and tried not to think about bleached bones and Mexican prisons and all the things that could go wrong smuggling twenty-five women and children across a homicidal desert.

A truck came by and Syd lifted her head from the pillow and searched the room with the look of someone used to waking up in strange places. "What's the matter," she said, "can't sleep at all anymore?"

Neal put his finger to his lips and then drew his hand level across the air in front of him to show her that everything was okay with him. She gave him a mocking smile. They were both nineteen, but the girl had a way of making him feel like a child. She lifted Lee's arm off her

shoulder and dropped it back across his chest as if returning something distasteful and then she was fast asleep again.

Neal went to the window and pulled back curtains saturated brown with years of cigarette smoke. He had been through plenty of Mexican towns before - Surfing spots along the Baja, Rosarito and Ensenada, or drunken affairs in Tijuana - but this town was something different altogether. It was hot and murderous with a thin veneer of cruelty coating everything in it, a dirty little outpost with a black soul and no legitimate purpose to it whatsoever. People did not live there so much as they accumulated like flotsam piling up behind a dam waiting to filter through to the other side. The whole thing was wearing him down, the town, the girl, the \$7,500 in the money belt he constantly wore around his waist. And then there had been that scene with the Federales and the girl the day before. It had scared him to death, made him sick to even think about it.

Neal had found the two Mexicans standing over the girl the moment he opened the motel room door. Federales in their olive-green uniforms and black-billed hats, roaming the Baja like freelancers, accountable to no one. Syd was in her shorts, sitting in the steel and vinyl chair with her shirt off, bare to the waist except for a towel wrapped around her wet hair. But the girl had played it smart. She kept an arm up across her chest and her eyes down. She wouldn't look at them. A cigarette burned in her other hand, but she did not raise it to her lips or move to put it out.

“Hay que una problema?” Neal asked them, his eyes darting between the girl and the men.

“No problema,” one of them said flatly. “Cierra la puerta,” he ordered.

Neal said he would not close the door, so the man stepped forward, grabbed his arm and jerked him into the room. He swung the door shut and blocked it closed with a black boot.

They began to question Neal in Spanish. Americans? No, the girl is Canadian. Why are you in Mexico? We're going fishing in San Felipe. So why aren't you in San Felipe then? We're meeting friends. Should have been here yesterday. Neal shook his head. Pendejos, he said. Tienes drogas? No drogas. Solamente cervezas. Neal smiled nervously and got nothing back but cold stares.

The girl's pack was dumped out on the bed, her things pushed around with the baton. A half dozen tampons, Chapstick, suntan lotion, a bottle of Tylenol, sunglasses. Neal could see the men measuring the situation then, weighing out the splitting of his skull and the raping of the Canadian girl. Where was Lee then? Lee, the war hero, the coyote, the gun runner, the briber of Mexican policemen. Where was he now to save this girl he had so stupidly brought along at the last minute?

The one standing over the girl pushed her hand down with the baton and stared at her breasts. She did not move. Smoke from her cigarette trailed up to the water-stained ceiling. Neal heard a group of local kids come down the road screaming and kicking a can around in the dirt. "Mister," they called to him in Spanish through the door. "Come back out and play with us again." The Federales did not seem to notice. The one standing above her looked down at the girl for a long time and then he inhaled deeply and glanced at his partner. His partner moved away from the door toward the girl. It was a mistake. The instant he moved, Neal stepped back and threw the door open wide. Sunshine streamed into the room. The children gathered in the doorway and yelled at Neal. "Come on, Mister. You said you'd be right back." Their eyes fell on

the Federales and then on the girl. They went silent, staring wide-eyed at the half naked gringo girl.

A motel maid appeared behind them, the leathery old woman darkening the doorway with her thick body. “Problema,” Neal whispered to her. He needn’t have bothered. The old woman had figured it out in an instant. “Hijos de putas,” she screamed at them. “Sons of bitches.” A second maid looked in and then pushed her way past Neal. “Qué decir de su esposa?” she barked at one of the men. “What would your wife say?”

“Salir de aquí. Get out of here,” he snapped, but the room had already become a swirling cloud of screaming women and children berating the two Federales, slapping at them with hand towels as if they were no more than stray dogs needing to be driven away. The men gave up, pushing their way out of the room and into the street. The shrieking mass of women and children followed them until they had disappeared around the corner. The children laughed and began to play again. “Come on, Mister!” they called to Neal.

Neal turned back to look at the girl. She sat there for a moment staring at the wall and then she shook her head and calmly tossed her cigarette into the sink. She pulled the shirt over her head, went to the window and stood watching the children playing in the dirt and broken glass. “This country is a fucking mess,” she said.

Lee eyed Neal in the mirror and then dipped his head down and splashed water onto his face and sandy blonde hair. He was 15 years older than Neal and still maintained the lean muscled frame of a field laborer. “What’s the matter, Bucko?” he said, with his head still down in the sink. “Losing your nerve?”

Neal did not answer.

Syd had been shoving clothes into her daypack. She flicked a thumb in Neal's direction. "He just sits up smoking all night," she said in a clinical tone that sounded to Neal like an anthropologist making a field observation.

Lee came away from the mirror drying his face with his shirt. He turned the chair backwards and swung a leg over and straddled it with his hands hanging over the back. "How about you, Syd?"

She tossed her backpack onto the bed. "It all sounds pretty fucked up to me."

Lee rested his head in his hands let out a long breath. "It's really pretty simple, guys," he said, measuring his words as though speaking to small children. "I drop you at the staging site outside of town. I go and pay off the policia, bring the Mexicans up, and when it gets dark we take them over. What's fucked up about that?"

Syd chewed at her fingernail. "Why are you talking to us like we're a pair of mongoloids?"

"Whatever," Lee said, leaning the chair back on two legs and smiling. "You guys worry too much. It's like I told you, *The Universe Will Provide.*"

She stared at him. "I don't even know what that means," she said flatly.

He spread his arms out wide. "You know, surround yourself with the universe and *The Universe Will Provide.*"

She stared some more.

"Get it?"

"Oh, I get it," she said after a few seconds. "It's just information I can't do anything with." She turned to the mirror and began pulling her hair back into a ponytail.

Lee opened his mouth to say something, but then gave up. The girl was wearing him out. He leaned back and took a pack of cigarettes off the sink and shook one out.

“So, you were in Iraq with Neal’s dad?” she said. It was directed at Lee, but she was studying Neal in the reflection of the mirror as she spoke, an elastic hair band clenched in her teeth.

“Yeah. I already told you that,” he said, annoyed. He glanced over at Neal.

“Uh-huh,” she said, turning away from the mirror to look at Lee. “And now you’re down here with your dead war buddy’s son smuggling Mexicans, is that it?”

“Hey, we’re down here to make some money, that’s what we’re doing,” he snapped. “Have you got a problem with that?”

She turned back to the mirror and fixed Neal with a flat, green-eyed stare in the reflection. She took the hair band from between her teeth, looped it around the ponytail and let it go with a snap. “I couldn’t give fuck,” she said. “I’m Switzerland over here. I stay out of other people’s bullshit.”

Lee got up from the chair and pulled his shirt over his head. He scooped the car keys off the table and slung his daypack over his shoulder. “I’m going to put gas in the car. I’ll pick you guys up in the mercado in an hour.” He paused and gave the girl a hard look. “Don’t cause any shit, Syd.” She gave a little salute into the mirror without looking back at him. “And you know what I mean,” he added. She didn’t answer him. He left.

Neal waited until he heard the car start up and drive off. “What was that supposed to mean?” he asked her.

She walked to the window, pulled back the drapes and looked both ways down the street. “I don’t know, Neal,” she said absently, not really paying any attention to him. “Maybe he

doesn't want me to fuck you while he's gone." She walked back to the mirror, reached behind the medicine cabinet and fished out a small plastic film canister and set it on the sink.

Neal sat up quickly. "That better not be weed in there," he said, alarmed.

"Don't be ridiculous," she said. "It's ecstasy."

"Ecstasy?" he yelped. "We're not crossing the border with anything like that, no fucking way."

She smirked. "You think two hits of X is really going to make that much of a difference if you get caught crossing the border with a bunch of half dead Mexicans?"

"Get rid of it!" he said sternly. "Get it out of here!"

"Relax," she said. "I'm not crossing anything with anybody, especially not you two fucking idiots." She opened her pack and tossed the canister inside. "While you little boys are smuggling your Mexicans, I'll be tripping out in the desert."

"By yourself?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Yeah." She plopped down on the bed beside him, lay back and stretched her arms over her head. "So, what do you think, Neal?" she purred. "You wanna fuck me?"

The comment was so unexpected that Neal gasped slightly and immediately felt ridiculous for doing it.

"Oh, dear," she said, with a bemused look.

He could feel his face beginning to flush and tried to turn away before she noticed it. It was too late.

"You really are such a sweet boy, Neal," she laughed. She rolled off the bed and lifted her backpack over her shoulder. "Come on, let's get out of this shithole," she said, heading for the door.

Neal watched her go. He stood up, shoved the last of his gear into his backpack and stared at himself in the mirror. Well, if there was one thing he was still sure of, it was that this girl was way out of his league.

The girl had been a surprise. Neal had not wanted her to come, but he didn't have the nerve to go up against Lee when it happened. Lee had met her once before on the beach and ran into her again in front of a convenience store on their way out of San Diego. It was still early in the morning and Syd was sitting on a bench near the side of the road with her daypack beside her. When Lee asked her where she was headed she ignored the question and asked him the same thing. He told her. Mexico.

She eyed the old Volvo station wagon suspiciously. "You're going to Mexico in that shit?"

Lee leaned across the seat and pulled the handle on Neal's side, the door swinging open and bouncing on its hinges. "Sure, why not?"

"It's a fucking housewife's car."

"It's a family car," he smiled.

She looked at Neal for a long time and then scanned the inside of the car, casing the joint before getting in. Neal saw her eyes settle on the quart of milk and the bag of doughnuts on the front seat. She slid into the back seat and reached over and took the milk. "I don't trust family cars," she said, lifting the milk and taking a long drink straight from the carton. "It's a real problem."

The girl had a wall around her. She deflected conversation, ignored questions, and said things purely for effect. Neal noticed that if you caught her at certain angles she was beautiful.

At others she was almost boyishly cute. She had straight black hair she wore mostly in a pony tail and liquid-green eyes that stared steadily out at the world. She had none of the coltishness Neal disliked in girls his age. Instead, she was square-shouldered, sturdy and well-balanced on her feet like an athlete. She never whined or complained and seemed utterly unafraid of Lee and his menacing toughness. The filth of the motel room and the town or its inhabitants didn't seem to bother her in the least. The longer he was around her, the more Neal found himself watching her when she wasn't looking.

Neal grabbed his pack, gave the motel room one last look and followed Syd out to the street. The town smelled of gasoline, fried fat, dogshit and uncollected garbage. A hot wind came down the road and blew dirt up at them. They turned their faces away and waited until it had passed. Syd tied a red bandana across her forehead and slipped her Wayfarers on. They went a few blocks, crossed the market square to a café with a few tables under a dusty cottonwood. They found a seat and Neal picked up a Mexican newspaper and began to read. Syd smoked a cigarette and then took out a small bottle of deep red nail polish. A waiter came over and Syd ordered a Coke.

“Sin hielo,” Neal added. “Don't drink the ice.”

Syd bent a leg up so her foot was on the chair and wiped her toenails with a napkin. She bumped the iron table with her knee and reached out and caught her Coke before it fell. Neal put the newspaper down. “Just let me do it,” he said.

She eyed him steadily for a moment and then slid the polish across the table and lifted her foot onto his thigh. She leaned back in her seat and watched him through the black sunglasses.

“You really think you’re going to be crossing any deserts any time soon?” she said, sipping her Coke.

He painted the first stroke and inspected it. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Never mind,” she said under her breath. “*The Universe Will Provide*, right?”

He went on painting. “You don’t think much of him, do you?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” She lifted her hands above her head and stretched. “I really don’t think about him much one way or the other.”

“Then why are you fucking the guy?” he asked without looking up.

“Hmm,” she purred ambiguously. “Are you still clinging to the quaint notion that sex actually means something, Neal?”

He did not answer her. “So why are you here, then?” he asked her.

“Adventure,” she said brightly.

He paused and motioned at the grimy mercado around them. “This is what you call adventure?”

“Sure. Adventure is being anywhere other than where you are now.”

He glanced up at her and then went back to painting. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

She shrugged. “So, why do you suddenly need all this money you guys are supposedly going to make?”

“To go surfing.”

She rolled her eyes. “You do that already.”

He finished painting the small toenail on one foot and then then lifted the other. “I want to surf my way around the world.”

She shook her head. “Why? That’s just doing the same thing you’re doing now, only in a different place.”

He dipped the brush into the small bottle. “Adventure is being anywhere other than where you are now, right, Syd?”

She took a sip from the Coke. “You’re right, that doesn’t make any sense.” She was silent for a while. “So why are you really here, Neal?” she asked with a seriousness he had not seen in her before.

He went on painting her toes without answering but could feel her eyes studying him.

She shook her head slowly. “Whatever it is you’re looking for, Neal, you’re not going to find it in this fucking guy.” She set the empty Coke bottle on the table. “So don’t even try.”

A short time later, they saw the old station wagon rolling slowly up the road toward the mercado. Neal dropped a five-dollar bill onto the table and they went out to the road.

Lee stepped out of the car. “So, are you coming or not?” he asked Syd. “Because if you’re not, this is where you get off.”

“I haven’t decided,” she said cheerfully.

Lee began to tell her why she absolutely had to make the decision right then. She appeared to listen for a few seconds and then opened the door, swung her pack onto the back seat and climbed in, leaving him talking to the empty space where she had just been. He let out a big sigh and then slid in behind the wheel without arguing.

They left the town and went out on the highway running east. A mile out, at a place where train tracks crossed the highway, they turned onto a dirt road that cut through greasebrush and mesquite, rocks pinging off the undercarriage, jackrabbits darting out from the beneath the

palo verde. The heat from the desert floor came up in ethereal waves that distorted a line of blue-gray mountains far to the west. Syd slept as they drove alongside a vast rancho marked with fencing made entirely of dried ocotillo branch woven together in lengths, its long thorns working like barbed wire. Lee followed the fence as it jagged and ran northward and then he slowed the wagon around a tall stand of cholla cactus and cut the engine.

Neal and Lee got out of the car and stood in the gypsum dust before an oversized shack made from a psychotic cake mix of cinderblock, railroad ties oozing creosote, wood slats torn from a faded cigarette billboard and tied with barbed wire. The rusted out corrugated tin roof was peeling up at the corners from the wind. A sign nailed above the door read, “El Pescador.”

“Why is there a fish restaurant in the middle of the desert?” Neal asked.

“Because there was a lake here once.” He pointed. “Out there.”

Neal stared out at a lakebed of dried mud pancaked and curling up at the edges like old linoleum tiles after a kitchen flood. A small fishing boat lay on its side on the cracked earth still tied to a dock that stretched out over what was now only desert. “Where did it go?”

“It’s dead. No water runs into it. It just gets smaller and smaller, year after year.”

Neal studied the abandoned fish restaurant. “How do you know about this place?”

“I came here with your dad, once,” Lee said.

Neal turned quickly to look at him. “My father was here?”

“It was the week before we shipped to Iraq,” Lee said, kicking at the dirt. “We knew we were headed into something bad. We just needed to get it out of our minds. Someone told us about this place.”

Neal scanned the landscape around them. “He was here? Right here?”

“Yeah,” Lee smiled. “Right here.”

And then he was dead two weeks later, thought Neal. He tried to fill the landscape in front of him with an image of his father, but he could not. He thought of all the days his father had taken him surfing, his voice calling to Neal over the crashing of the waves. Neal swallowed to keep back the sadness and tears that always seemed to come whenever he thought of him.

Lee watched him. “Do you still think about your father all the time, Neal?”

Neal stared at the emptiness of the dry lakebed.

“Well, do you?”

Syd woke up and came over to where they were standing. She looked around. “This is what the moon would look like if it had plants,” she said, yawning. She turned to the fish house and her eyes settled on the cacophony of building materials. “And this fucking thing is not at all up to code.”

Lee opened the back of the station wagon and took out their daypacks, a sleeping bag, tent and two gallons of water. “If something happens to me and I don’t come back, just hang out here. Someone will drive by.” He stood up straight, hands on his hips. “All right, bucko,” he said to Neal. “Time to do this thing.”

Neal squinted into the sunlight at the older man and then pulled up his shirt, tore the velcro straps loose and tossed the money belt to him. It was too late to do anything else.

Lee stuffed the money belt into the waistline of his jeans and climbed into the car.

Syd walked up to the window and stood with her hands on her hips. “How about you leave us the rest of that water?” she said. “We might need it in the highly unlikely event you don’t come back.”

He started the engine. "Help yourself," he smiled, motioning with his head toward the back of the Volvo. Syd opened the rear door and took out two more gallons. "Leave one for me," he called out to her.

"Fuck you," she said over her shoulder, walking away to set the two plastic bottles next to the others.

Neal glanced at Syd and then quickly back to the car. "You are coming back, aren't you, Lee?"

Lee started the engine with a roar. "Don't worry about it," he said, looking out the window at Neal. "*The Universe Will Provide*. It always does." He seemed to hesitate for a moment, but then put the car into gear and drove off.

Neal and Syd climbed the small hill looking down on the fish house. In the distance they saw a plume of gypsum dust trailing off from the station wagon as Lee drove north along the lakebed. The sun was cresting over them and a hot breeze came down off the mountains to the east.

"He's not coming back, is he?" Neal said flatly.

"No, Neal, he's not coming back."

He watched the car driving away far in the distance. "You tried to tell me, didn't you?"

"Yup. About a thousand times."

"Why didn't you just come out and say it?"

She held out her hands. "Switzerland. Remember?"

Neal sat down on the dirt and leaned back on his elbows. “You know what he told me the other day?” he said, looking up at the girl outlined against the sky. “He told me that we were like family.”

She nodded. “Well, if you’re ever wondering who’s gonna fuck you, Neal, family is the first place you should look.” She reached into her daypack and pulled out the plastic film canister and popped the top off with her thumb. “I think it’s high time you got happy, Neal.”

She pressed the waxy capsule filled with dirty brown powder into his hand like it was something sacred, something not to be dropped. Neal did not hesitate and he did not ask questions, he just tossed it in his mouth and poured the water in behind it.

Syd lifted the pack over her shoulder. “Let’s walk,” she said. “I don’t want to be anywhere near this fish house when I start coming on to this shit.”

They went in the direction of the mountains, walking among the snakeweed and palo verde. After a while they stopped at a stand of beavertail cactus. Neal peeled a prickly pear with his Swiss Army knife and they sat eating it.

“I didn’t know you could eat these things?” Syd said, smiling mysteriously.

Neal stood plucking needles from his fingertips. “I don’t feel anything off this stuff gave me,” he said.

Syd tilted her head back. “Are you sure?” she said in a dreamy voice. “Do you feel the wind?”

Neal held his arms out. The wind was coming over him like velvet, the sadness of the day draining out of him. “My god,” he laughed. “This wind.” He was suddenly very aware of the roof of his mouth. “There’s something going on with the roof of my mouth, Syd.”

She turned and smiled at him. “See?” she said knowingly. She came up to face him and put her hands on his shoulders and stood on her toes. She smelled clean and he could feel her breath softly against his cheek. He thought she might be about to kiss him, but she did not. “Let me see your eyes,” she said, instead. He opened his eyes wide and she leaned in close to stare into them, her own eyes so green it took his breath away. “Oh, yeah,” she said, dropping back down off her toes. “You are definitely rollin’ now.”

Neal grinned and stepped back into a cholla cactus.

“Whoa there, cowboy,” she laughed. “Watch out for the pointy things.”

He tilted his head back and looked into a clear blue sky. “I’m off my fucking head,” he yelled into the desert air.

They walked on, Neal following and concentrating on the feel of the wind and the sound of the gravel crunching beneath his shoes. He found that he was in love with everything, thrilled with the outline of each plant and the way the sun glanced off Syd’s skin. He was gliding effortlessly, hyperaware, supertactile. He wanted to confess all things to her. “Your skin is so beautiful, Syd,” he could not stop himself from telling her.

She dipped her head and smiled softly. “Do you feel the wind?”

They found a cluster of date palms and sat beneath their shade. Syd was opening up like a flower now. She laughed and looked him in the eye. She said they should be blood brothers and broke a thorn off an ocotillo bush. She pricked her finger and then his, holding his hand gently, the thorn sliding painlessly beneath his skin.

“Do you think I’m pretty, Neal?”

“Oh, god, yes. You’re so beautiful I can hardly look at you.”

She brought his fingertip to her lips and sucked a bead of blood to the surface and then mixed it with hers. She lay back in the sand. "I want to feel like this forever, Neal. I don't ever want to come down."

It made him sad the way she said it. Sad like he felt outside of San Diego when Lee asked her if she wanted to stop at a restaurant that said "Home Cooking" on the sign and she said she didn't know, she'd never had it before.

"Tell me it's going to be okay, Syd."

"It's going to be okay, Neal. I'll go surfing with you. You can teach me."

"We can go to Bora Bora," he said, looking up at the date palms being pulled by the velvet wind.

"Where the fuck is Bora Bora?" she said breathlessly.

Neal thought about it. "I don't know, but we'll go there."

She turned her head to look at him. "You wouldn't lie me about that, would you, Neal?"

"No," he promised her.

"Good," she said. "I was afraid you might be lying to me." She rolled onto her side and kissed him softly on the mouth, her fingertips pressed to his neck. When he looked into her eyes she kissed him again and he felt himself drifting, falling, utterly lost in her.

The snake that got her was a western diamondback curled up just under the porch of the fish house. They had walked in one big circle without even knowing it and ended up right where they had started. It was late afternoon and the drug was beginning to wear off. Syd had gone inside the fish house to look around while Neal put up the tent. When she jumped down from the porch, Neal heard her say "shit" the way other women say it when they break a nail. She took a

few steps, sat down in the sand and looked at the puncture holes in her calf. “Oh, damn it,” she said under her breath, wiping the sand away.

Neal knelt beside her and pinched up the skin around the holes and sucked at the wound even though he knew it would do no good. He spit a mouthful of blood and saliva into the dirt. “Don’t worry, snake bites don’t kill people,” he told her. “Everyone thinks they do, they don’t really.”

She turned her leg out and studied the two holes. “Some people die from bee stings, Neal.”

He put up the small tent and rolled out the sleeping bag. She lay on it with her head on her pack as the sky outside grew dark. He took the bandana from around her head and used it to clean the wound with the drinking water. “Don’t move around, Syd. You need to stay still.” She nodded silently. He brought her some water and she drank. She was very quiet then, thinking. He felt the swelling around the wound and saw the redness beginning to streak down her leg. He asked her how she felt.

“Fine. Don’t worry,” she said in a clear voice, smiling up at him.

He sat at the opening to the tent, looking out through the desert darkness for the headlights of any car that might come by, but he knew none would. “I think I should try to walk out to the main road,” he told her.

She leaned up on an elbow and stared at him, searching his face. He could see her eyes had gone glassy. “Don’t go, Neal,” she said flatly.

“I’ll come back,” he said.

“I know you would,” she said. “But don’t go.”

He didn't think she would die, but she did.

Somewhere in the night he awoke to hear her humming softly. She said she was keeping herself company and smiled up at him in the darkness. He checked her leg and gave her water and then sat at the opening of the tent looking out at the desert night and listening to her hum. A coyote trotted out from the darkness and veered sharply away from the tent. She stopped humming and a few moments later he heard her whisper to herself, "Oh god, I am so lost."

And then she was dead and there was nothing to be done about it. He sat beside her, took the bandana from around her leg and gently wiped the sand from her cheek. He held her hand and stayed like that throughout the night. Morning came and the sky glowed orange behind the low hills to the east throwing long shadows across the empty lakebed. Neal walked out to the end of the dock to where the abandoned fishing boat lay on its side and sat with his legs hanging over the edge. A sliver of sun appeared over the ridgeline and in the distance he thought he could see the shimmering of a lake, its waters stretching out to the curve of the earth.