

“An Afternoon in the Hills”

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Fiction

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The woman – thirty-four, exceptionally fit, her hair twisted in two, tight braided rows – attacks the rocky incline and reaches the overlook. She bends over, hands on knees. A bead of sweat rides the ridge of her nose. The going was tough on the way up to this elevation, some two thousand feet high in the hills of Malibu. Her name is Gemma, the same as her great-aunt, a Roman baker who was killed in a road accident on the Amalfi Coast in 1962. All Italians on her mother’s side. On her father’s, Persian Jewish ancestry.

Behind her somewhere down below is the man, her boyfriend (or “partner” as her more progressive friends have advised her to reference him). Davin from Indiana. Well, originally from Indiana. His family relocated to Hermosa Beach in the mid-80s and scooped up some property while it was still cheap, and kept on scooping up property until they had amassed quite the portfolio, the majority of which Davin’s sister manages and develops to this day. He’s older, forty, and bigger – not exactly built like a football player but perhaps a rugby player, though he doesn’t know the first thing about that sport. Also, he’s not particularly athletic nor nearly as fit as Gemma is. She makes sure not to let him forget that fact.

Gemma straightens up and looks out toward the Pacific, which is a preternaturally sapphire and incomprehensibly scopious from this vantage. Like looking into the womb of infinity – a reminder that she is but a speck on a speck on a speck no matter how much she

prefers to think otherwise. It is windy and the sky is empty except for passenger jets arcing like arrows far overhead, en route to SFO and Sea-Tac. Waves upon waves crest and spray white froth in chains along the shore, where surfers bob in formation. Her mind churns: thorny cogitations that she thought she had put to sleep days and weeks ago, materializing and beckoning to her from the shadows.

In a few minutes, Davin's grunting announces his arrival. He agrees to participate in these hikes not primarily because he wants to get in shape, but because he wants Gemma to *think* that he wants to get in shape. And because he worships her like a fanboy. As arduous as it is, an excursion like this – just the two of them, under the open sun, away from the busy world – tightens their bond somehow, he thinks, the way an expedition across uncharted scablands might have knit together the pioneering bands of yore.

Davin's mother, an airline executive, was outdoorsy, still is, but his father has always been a bit of a house cat. A science fiction aficionado, he reads books as if he were being paid by the word. He boasts of having completed each and every one of Arthur C. Clarke's eighty-two published tomes and much of Asimov's bottomless oeuvre. And he fancies himself a bit of a futurist, claiming to have precisely anticipated not only the advent of the compact disc but also its demise. A PhD in economics, he makes his living consulting for rare earth metals companies, or something along that line. Davin is a sculptor and has never made much of an effort to comprehend his father's vocation.

"Mamma mia," Davin exhales upon reaching Gemma. He drops his backpack to the ground and extracts a Nalgene bottle filled with ice water. He quaffs half of it before Gemma smacks him lightly.

"Save some for the fishies."

“Sorry. I’m sweating like a whore in church.”

“What else is new?” She snags the bottle from him and takes a big sip.

Davin watches her for a moment, half-smiling, then steps toward the edge of the overlook and stretches like a grizzly bear at dawn. “What a view, babe.”

“Totally.” Gemma approaches from behind and wraps her arms around his belly, rubs it.

“Can I make a wish?”

“What are you talking about?”

“If I rub your chubby gut, will my wish come true?”

He chuckles, turns to face her. “Your wish already came true.”

“What does that mean?”

“I think that ever since you were a schoolgirl you dreamed of landing a hunk of beef like me.”

“You make it sound gross.”

“Just saying.” He embraces her tightly and kisses her on the top of the head. She smiles against his shoulder.

The sun is fiery, but the air is cool and clean, and Gemma savors the sensation of the cottony breeze across her bare shoulders. Davin smells damp and earthy, which she decides is not just tolerable but appealing.

“How much do I have to love you?” he asks, resting his chin on the top of her head.

“All the way.”

“How will I know when I get there?”

She laughs quietly. “It’s a journey, not a destination.”

They share a peanut butter Clif Bar then continue upward. Gemma agrees to slow down so that they can hike together. A few times Davin pats her butt as she scales rocky terrain in front of him.

“Do that again and I’m going to leave you behind and the vultures will get you,” she warns.

He pats her butt again. She grumbles, but doesn’t mean it.

Davin wonders whether Gemma is his forever person. He knows, beyond a doubt, that he wants her to be, but he cannot see into her mind. She has not put up a wall between them, so to speak, but she certainly has hung a curtain, and not the transparent kind they make for showers. It *feels* like she is in love with him, but if he were asked about it and forced to answer honestly, he would say, *I have no idea*.

This is not where he wanted to be, emotionally, relationally, at this point in his life. In fact, he had expected to be married with children before the age of thirty, like his parents. But God tittered at his plans, and when he asked Diane the Greek pastry chef to marry him twelve years ago, so did she. Perhaps she did not laugh, but she rejected him outright and jettisoned their relationship on the spot. “You asking me that question has made me realize that this is not right,” she said, a deluge of tears wetting her face. “I should not have wasted so much of your time.”

At first, five years of commitment imploding at the moment of a proposal *did* feel like a waste of time. But with the passing of the months and years, and a small fortune in therapy, Davin came to accept it not as a disaster but as a growing pain. Or maybe a growing tumor surgically excised with medieval implements.

However, he is now approaching that same fulcrum with Gemma. They have been linked for over two years, and Davin has never felt so fervently (if that’s the word) about another person

in his lifetime. He is not getting any younger, and he would be a fool not to shoot his shot soon – very soon. For a moment, actually, he entertained the idea of proposing to her on this very hike. But she deserves something classier and, in a way, he wants to raise the stakes as high as possible. Maybe pop the question during a hot air balloon ride, something death-defying like that. He wants to leave nothing on the table. If he goes down, he wants to go down in a blaze of glory.

They arrive at the apex of the hike forty minutes later, where they find a clearing that looks south toward Los Angeles proper, the hazy residential sprawl and spikes of high-rises in Santa Monica and Westwood and Downtown. Contrary to popular opinion, Gemma finds it to be an enthralling sight, a comely, verdant city. Having resided in Denver, Boston, and London, and having traveled to dozens of other cities throughout the world, she is confident, at least for the time being, that this is the place for her. She is a professor of Art History at Pepperdine, a position which she finds thoroughly fulfilling albeit almost all-consuming. In addition to her heavy lecturing load, she is facing a stressful deadline on the draft of her most recent book on 19th Century Spanish modernism. Publish or die, they say.

Gemma was previously an Assistant Curator at LACMA, which is where she first encountered Davin. He was part of an exhibition in the Spring of 2020, which featured contemporary industrial sculptors from throughout the West Coast. His contribution was a series of large-scale, impressionistic bronze pieces, entitled *Functionate*, which contemplates the interplay between human labor and ecology. He was the most nitpicky artist of the bunch and micro-managed every moment of the handling and installation of his work. Although, at first, she found it oppressive and off-putting, with time his behavior – his frenzied devotion to his craft –

grew to be ingratiating and, in some way, reassuring. Ultimately, attention to detail and high standards, Gemma felt, spoke to Davin's potential as a boyfriend (partner).

Davin lays out a beach blanket in the dry dirt and produces two Vitamin Waters, two peanut butter, jelly, and banana sandwiches, and a single tulip, which has been pressed flat in the backpack. He holds it out for Gemma.

"Aww," she coos, taking it. "A smushed flower. I feel that there is some subtext in that."

"No subtext. Just trying to delight my fair lady. A tulip for a tulip."

She smirks then sniffs it. "Smells good, though."

They unwrap their sandwiches and take bites, sip their drinks, and gaze out over the bustling conurbation.

"I'm not sure how many babies I want," Gemma states suddenly.

"I thought you wanted three."

"That was an approximation."

"An approximation for what?"

"For somewhere between zero and three."

Davin raises his chin and narrows his eyes. "*Between* zero and three, or *including* zero and three?"

"Including," she says softly, diffidently.

"You might not want children?"

"I'm not sure..."

"Wait a second," he starts, his voice amplifying a bit. "I thought we were in lockstep on this."

"I did, too. I've just been thinking..." She trails off.

Davin takes a deep, audible breath. He doesn't want this to turn into something uncomfortable or frictive. He needs to defend the intimate sanctity of this hike, coddle it like a newborn hamster. He rolls his head from side to side, then asks, cautiously, "What have you been thinking?"

Gemma takes another sandwich bite and chews slowly. "I'm just satisfied right now. I'm content."

"So am I."

"I know."

"How does this affect our breeding plans?"

"*Breeding?* What on earth? Are you a freaking cattle rancher? Do I look like a heifer?"

Davin laughs at this because she resembles a panther or some other lithe jungle feline far more than any kind of livestock. "OK. Bad word. How about 'our reproductive strategy'?"

"Strange, but better," she says.

"Tell me, then."

"Well, it's a kind of one-in-the-hand versus two-in-the-bush sort of situation."

"Do go on..."

Gemma gestures toward the wider world. "Everything is, more or less, spot on right now. Like, right on the money. I like where we live. I love what I do. I enjoy almost every day. I have a decently handsome and handy boyfriend, even. I'm not sure I want to mess with that."

"It could be even better."

"It could be even worse."

Davin nods and offers a slightly pained expression. Gemma gets like this sometimes: enigmatic, twisted, paradoxical even. At first he wondered whether it had to do with her

hormones but soon realized the timing did not correlate, then felt stupid and shallow for entertaining that sort of chauvinist notion. In recent months, he has come to realize that she is a more complex soul than he first gave her credit for. Perhaps a bit fractured, even. He had thought for a long time that her head was screwed on straighter than most and that her vision for the future had long ago crystallized. Clearly, this is not the case. To a degree, it unsettles him. To another degree, it makes her vulnerable and more accessibly human and, he hopes, in greater need of a loyal, devoted, enamored forever person.

“Well, I’m with you no matter what you decide,” he declares. “You know I want children, but I want you even more than I want children.”

“You shouldn’t do that,” she responds, with a hint of a whine in her voice.

“Do what?”

“Compromise.”

“Would you prefer that I start a fight?”

“Actually, yes! I *would* prefer that.”

“Are you trying to start a fight right now?”

“Maybe.”

Davin chuckles at her quirky orneriness. Strangely, it makes him feel good. Her peccadillos are more alluring than her features in a way. And every day, every moment he seems to love her more. Either he is a sap, or this is the real thing.

Davin sets down his sandwich and drink, and lies down with his head in Gemma’s lap.

“Let’s fight then,” he says.

She runs her hand across his scalp. He sports a buzz cut, has for the last year. He likes the angular shape of his head and so does Gemma.

“I think you make it too easy for me,” she suggests.

“Too easy for what?”

“This relationship is just too easy for me. Aren’t you afraid that I will take you for granted and just up and walk out one day? Or maybe I’ll find someone who is harder to handle.”

“You want a bad boy?”

“Maybe.”

Davin grins though mildly irked. “Then I think you should go get one. There’s a lot of them out there. Make sure to pick one who wears a gold chain and neglects you. Then you’ll feel complete.”

Gemma’s face tightens and she looks away. She wipes a tear from her eye as soon as it forms.

Noticing this, Davin quickly sits up. He has only seen her cry twice over the course of their relationship. He takes a position facing her and holds her hands. “You’re not breaking up with me, are you?”

“No,” she says, “I can’t.”

Davin feels a squirrely sensation in his gut. “Do you feel trapped?”

“No... not at all. Well... I kind of feel that I’m wearing golden handcuffs.”

“Then you do feel trapped!”

“Not trapped, Davin. Captured, maybe.”

He rubs his hand across his eyes and lets out a liberal guffaw. Even when Gemma is driving a stake into his heart, he can’t help but enjoy her.

“Don’t laugh!” She says, fighting back a smile.

“I’m not laughing at you. I don’t know why I’m laughing. ‘Captured’ is a funny word, I think. But, you know what? I *did* capture you and I don’t apologize for it. The spoils are mine. The booty is mine. And, yes, your handcuffs are golden.”

Gemma looks at her wrists. “They kind of look good on me, maybe, to be honest.”

Davin rolls his eyes playfully. Sometimes, it’s as if Gemma is written in ancient hieroglyphics and he has misplaced the Rosetta Stone.

They doze off for a while, holding each other.

Then, with the sun easing westward, they begin their descent.

Nearing the end of the trail, Gemma steps on an apple-sized stone and wrenches her ankle. She tumbles to the dirt, scraping the palms of her hands. Davin hurries to her aid. She groans, clutching the injured joint.

“Fuck, Davin. Oh fuck, fuck, fuck.”

“Let me see.”

She moves her hands and he assesses her foot. It has already begun to swell and appears to be bent at an unnatural angle. “I’m not an expert,” he says, “but this thing looks fucked up.”

“No shit!” Gemma begins to cry. “I knew this would happen. I was overdue!”

Davin props her up so that she can lean back against a boulder. “There’s no chance you can walk is there?”

“Does it look like it?” she snaps. “It’s broken, Davin!”

“OK, OK. Let’s just rest here for a second. Maybe it’s dislocated. Maybe I can pop it back in.”

“Oh, hell no! Davin, you’re not Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman. If it’s broken, you’ll screw it up even worse.”

“You’re right. Let’s relax for a bit.” He puts his arm around her and she leans against him. Her breath is shallow and pocked with wincing of pain. Two tangerine butterflies flutter past.

Gemma moans. “I’m a mess.”

“We’ll get you fixed up, baby.”

“I’ll still be a mess.”

He kisses her on the temple. She shivers.

“I’m going to die young, like my mom,” she says stiffly.

“No you are not, Gemma.”

“But I can’t see the future.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know what’s coming. I used to know. I used to have goals that turned into plans that turned into reality. But now...”

She trails off and Davin cocks his head thoughtfully. She takes hold of his upper arm and squeezes.

“You’re afraid,” he says after a moment. “You’ve never been afraid before.”

She nods, and after a long pause: “I dunno.”

He kisses her forehead. “Nothing to fear. Nothing to fear.”

After a while they decide to test her walking ability. She buckles and yelps with the slightest exertion. Then Davin attempts to carry her down the trail piggyback. However the footing is too treacherous and his balance too precarious. He gingerly sets Gemma back down.

“I’m going to run down the trail to see if I can find someone,” he tells her.

“Do you think we should call a helicopter or something like that?”

“That might be a bit much, my dear. We’re less than a mile to the car. Let me see if there’s somebody who can help me with you.”

“OK,” she sighs. “Don’t leave me too long.”

“Just hang tight, baby. You’ll be OK. There’s more Vitamin Water in the pack.”

Davin sets off and, not far away, encounters two young men hiking up the hill. They agree without hesitation to assist with the extraction.

Soon, Gemma is propped between Davin and the tall one called Tim. She has her arms over their shoulders. In front of them is the shorter one called Dev. Gemma lifts her legs and he very carefully takes hold of them so that she is now in a somewhat horizontal position, as if she is being stretchered.

“Oh my God, this is ridiculous,” she blurts. “You guys are too nice.”

“It’s nothing,” says Dev. “This will be our workout for the day.”

“Am I that heavy?!”

“No, not at all,” Tim says.

“You’re an appropriate weight, baby,” Davin notes.

“Wow, Davin. What a complement.”

The men laugh loudly.

Less than twenty minutes later, the group makes it back to the parking lot. They set Gemma down and, standing on one foot, she gives big, warm hugs to Tim and Dev. The men then turn back to the hiking trail and set off again.

Gemma and Davin decide to go directly to the UCLA Medical Center. She lays down in the back seat and elevates her sore foot, which has swelled dramatically. He speaks to her in a

reassuring but irreverent way, and she realizes that he knows exactly what she needs in every circumstance.

“Let’s have three children,” she says to him in a pained voice.

“That’s what you’re thinking about right now?”

“I can’t help what I think about.”

“Approximately or exactly?”

“What?”

“Approximately or exactly three?”

She laughs and realizes how absurd her previous comments on this subject were. “Let’s try for three on the dot.”

“We should probably get married first,” Davin notes.

“I know.”

Davin smiles and winks at her in the rearview mirror. She winks back.

Later, in the hospital, Dr. Lee hums as he examines three x-rays closely, with his nose almost touching the screen.

“This is a dislocation, not a break,” he declares finally.

“Damn, I could have fixed it!” Davin says, making the nurse laugh.

Fortunately, Gemma does not require surgery, but the procedure to remedy the dislocation is no walk in the park. Dr. Lee injects some local anesthetics into her ankle then, as she howls in pain and clutches Davin’s hands, manipulates and yanks on her foot until there is a conclusive popping noise.

“That should do it,” Dr. Lee says with a kind smile. He recommends Tylenol and ibuprofen, ice, elevation, and rest. “You will be on crutches for a week or two, and no hiking for at least two months. How bad is the pain on a scale of one to ten?”

“A nine-point-five,” she answers.

“I could write you a prescription for codeine, but only two days’ worth.”

“No thanks. I don’t like to mess around with that kind of stuff.”

“That’s a good thing,” says Dr. Lee.

At night, Gemma is in unbearable anguish. It takes a herculean effort to get her out of her hiking pants and into comfortable pajamas. She lies on the couch with her feet propped on a cushion atop Davin’s lap. Her ankle is three shades of blue. He caresses her thighs and knees.

They smoke a pre-rolled joint, then watch two old episodes of Anthony Bourdain’s *Parts Unknown*.

“In my next life, I’ll be a travel show host,” Gemma says, a bit loopy.

“I’d watch that show. It would be a dark comedy, right?”

She snorts a laugh and takes hold of Davin’s hand.

Sometime after midnight, he clicks off the television and they sit in the black silence.

“Do you want to go to bed?” he asks her.

“Not yet, baby,” she replies, her eyes closed.

“You’ll fall asleep.”

“That’s OK.”

Even when both of her legs are functioning, this is a regular occurrence. Gemma passes out on the couch and Davin later carries her to bed. He, of course, does not mind this duty. He relishes it. It is, in a way, the cornerstone of their relationship, he thinks.

In a few minutes, Gemma begins snoring softly. Davin extracts himself from beneath her legs, then quietly and tenderly scoops her into his arms.