

FICTION

EL MORRO

BY DAVID MEANS



You see, some goddess or something lived in this lake, back when it was freshwater, and then she got tired of the place and fled north and took most of the water with her, and now these natives make yearly barefoot pilgrimages down to this muddy hole and dip leaves into the brine and lick them the way you'd lick a lollipop, or something like that, he said, and he continued talking while the desert slid past, slowly, it seemed, because the horizon was so far off and only things that were close zipped by, and she tried hard to avoid looking at the edge of the road, keeping her eye as far out in the desert as possible, letting him go on with whatever subject was at hand. There were four main strands that formed the litany of his thinking. First and foremost was drugs of all forms and types, their histories and medicinal uses, and their abused uses, on which he was even more of an expert—in particular acid, marijuana, and crystal, his favorite topic and his favorite drug. He talked about drugs as they left his cabin, east of Santa Cruz, all the way down the Pacific Coast Highway, through Los Angeles and out to Palm Springs.

On the way through Joshua Tree, where there was nothing but bare land and a few trees, as far as she could see, he shifted course, and began talking about native culture and native history, his words bent and twisted through his claim (false) that he had native blood, just a generation removed, and that he was related to one of the AIM leaders, a total sellout who could be seen on occasion in bit movie roles, one of those silent Indian types, you know, with the furrowed brow and the hawk eyes, who scrutinize the horizon with the slightly bemused expression you get when you've been betrayed so many times you're no longer betrayed. Eventually, he fixed on the Zuni Pueblo tribe (My true passion. I mean that), and went on for hours, his voice light and airy as he altered history to please his ear, until the Zuni were not only worshippers of deep pits, navels (Yes, fucking navels!), in which their souls and histories were prefabricated, but also stargazers who could see the future with ninety-nine-point-nine-percent accuracy. He talked about a holy seer named Don Juan. Not the fake one, who had supposedly helped Carlos Cas-

taneda along the road to a cosmic experience back in the sixties (Not! Not! Not! he said, slamming the wheel), but, rather, a true visionary named Juan, a Yaqui elder who really knew his shit. (He wasn't a Zuni, but, God damn it, he should have been one!) As he continued talking, his voice trapped in the car, she searched the landscape for the proverbial trees and tried to tune out his voice, to reduce his words to background noise, like the slip-streamed air coming through the open window.

He talked about birds, his key obsession being hawks, falcons, and falconry, a subject he seemed able to expound on for long stretches, despite his limited knowledge, theorizing about the homing instinct and the pleasure that birds found in their ability to ride the thermals that bloomed from the desert in the afternoon. He stared out at the road and waxed poetic about the way birds flew, the prowess they exuded, saying, Man, those fuckers home in and find a victim from ten miles up, catching the slightest movement, and then dive sightless, eyes closed against the dust and wind, using pure motion and nothing but motion until they're right on top of the kill. You'd be hard-pressed to know which side of the story to look at, because it all meets up right there when the bird hits the prey and the prey, which wasn't anything, man, becomes something, for a second, at least, and then suddenly it's nothing but a half-dead carcass being lifted into the sky. Let me put it another way. One second some rodent is poking around obliviously in the weeds, and the next he's being dragged into the sky amid a storm of wings, he said. Then he fell into an unusually long silence—while the desert rolled past, the rubble and sage rough in the setting sun—and she figured he was thinking about his brother, Stanley, who had, according to a story he'd told her back at his cabin in Santa Cruz, during their first night together, met his Maker in the early days of the Iraq war in the form of a wayward Air Force missile, a targeting error. My brother died over there, he'd said. He looked up into the sky and saw it coming. At least for a split second, he knew what was going to hit him, man. You always know what's gonna hit you. Maybe for only a sliver of a second. But

you still know. Every second, there's a missile ready to strike you in the head.

His fourth topic was more obtuse—at least, she thought so. It was vague, difficult to pin down. When he got started on the fourth topic, as they headed to Tucson (Got a deal to close down there. Business draws me south), she tried to find new, creative ways to avoid listening, putting her fingers in her ears, humming softly to herself, because his fourth topic was her story, and, since he didn't have much to go on in the way of details, he made up most of it from the few facts she had given him back in California: I'm an Illinois girl, she had explained to him on their first night together. My father was a farmer outside Springfield. He tossed me out of the house. They were in bed, smoking a joint, listening to the wind sigh through the second-growth redwoods. Don't say another word, he'd said. Don't say anything else. That's all I need to hear. I'll take the story from there. I really mean it. Not another word. I'd rather fill in the blanks. (Right then she had felt herself adjusting to his way of thinking, drawing on her months on the street, finding a place for him among the characters she'd met: junkies who took in a question and sucked on it for a few minutes before giving a response that seemed far off the mark, as if they were responding to whatever you'd uttered by combining it with some other, more weighty problem; meth freaks who'd answered a question before you even finished asking it and then, overjoyed at their precision and their mystic abilities, fell into blank funks of rage when you shook your head or corrected them; lonely drifter girls who spun monologues of torment and grief that were beautiful in their vivid details, evoking high-tension wires singing in the wind, fathers with hard fists and groping fingers, sexual organs against the thigh, confusion in dimly lit parking garages. For example, one afternoon, in the hills above Hollywood, not far from the horse stables at Griffith Park—an occasional snort or harness jangle could be heard—her friend Kimberly had told her a story that included a blurry-eyed trek through the suburbs of Chicago; an Oak Park businessman named Smith who had taken her under his

STEFANIE SCHNEIDER, FROM THE SERIES "SUNWINGERS" (2005)