

The Dry Spell by James P. Blaylock

The rain gauge was empty when Harper pulled it out of the middle of the lawn and held it up to the sun, which was just now showing through broken clouds in the east. There was supposed to be rain by this morning, but there wasn't so far, and now the clouds seemed to be leaving town in a hurry, heading toward the desert, where they would evaporate like failed hope. That had been going on all week. Lana, his wife, had told him a few moments ago that the sky looked "threatening," but the word was apparently an exercise in imagination. Lana was sitting on the couch inside, sorting through old photos, swept up in a pleasant, rainy day nostalgia that entirely eluded Harper.

The lawn had a faded, thin look to it, and the petunias he had planted last weekend were half withered. April showers hadn't materialized, and the entire street looked parched, like mid-September in a heat wave. There was an irritating warmth to the morning, too, as if they were in for another day of "fine weather," which meant no weather at all. May was the dead end of what passed for the rainy season in southern California, and the chance of rain would be more and more remote as the days drifted past.

Last night on the news there had been a "storm watch"—reporters dressed in unnecessary rain slickers, looking furtive with expectation, as if at any moment the sky would open up and the populace would have to roll their arks out of mothballs and load up the cats and dogs. Harper had awakened early in the morning, listening for the patter of raindrops on the shingles, slowly coming to realize that he had been dreaming, the victim of his own mental storm watch.

He set the rain gauge down on a front porch chair and walked out to the sidewalk to pick up the *Times*, which was double-bagged, like last night's reporters. Abruptly he felt a scattering of tiny, windblown drops on his face, and there was the promising smell of ozone rising from the concrete. But just as quickly as it had materialized, the breeze carried it away. He looked up at the clouds, estimating which of them had made this wheezing pretence of an effort, but overhead there was a broadening window of vacant blue sky. Impulsively angry, he bent over and cranked open the valve on the front yard sprinklers. He was through waiting. The wild idea came into his head to turn on the sprinklers in every front yard on the block. He could explain to his neighbors with no exaggeration that he was performing a scientific experiment in weather manipulation....

He heard a screen door slam shut. It was his neighbor, Sharon, out on her side porch with her five-year-old son, whom she called Doc. She grinned skeptically at Harper. "What's with the sprinklers?" she asked, gesturing at the sky.

"I thought I'd force the issue," Harper told her. "Maybe I can shame Mother Nature into actually raining for a change." He laughed even though it wasn't funny to him. He was pretty sure that Sharon thought he was insane anyway, and it was better to make it seem like a joke. He picked up the little screwdriver that he kept on the porch and fiddled with the adjustment screws on the top of two of the pop-ups, decreasing the amount of water coming out so that all of it fell only on the grass. There was no use watering the sidewalk and street.

Sharon had picked up her newspaper and pulled off the plastic wrap. She had a section of it opened up. "Rain forecast!" she said, waving it at him. She laughed and shook her head, but then saw that Doc had unwound a couple of yards of hose and was turning on the spigot. He shot a jet of water at his mother and started laughing, but then quit when he saw that she wasn't amused. Sharon gave Harper a look, as if Doc's madness was his fault, and then shut off the water and went inside, taking the boy with her.

Harper went back into the house. Two cardboard boxes lay on the floor in front of the couch, stuffed with half a lifetime's worth of yellow photo packets. "Take a look at this," Lana said to him. She didn't glance up, but reached over and picked up a photograph that she had apparently set aside. For a

moment she sat there smiling at it. “Remember that storm in Maui?” she asked. “When we were staying at that little place on the beach in Hana? What was that called? The Bamboo Hilton or something?”

“Bamboo Castle, I think.” Harper took the photo from her and looked at it. He found that he remembered it in detail, actually, although it had been twenty years ago. It had taken them four hours to drive the sixty miles from the airport out to Hana on the narrow highway that ran through the jungle, and they had gotten to the cottage after dark, carrying a loaf of banana bread and a bag of papayas and tiny orange limes that they had bought from a hippie farmer in a roadside stand. Harper remembered the sound of waves breaking on the rocky beach when they arrived, the beach and ocean barely visible in the darkness, and then the full moon appearing through broken clouds, illuminating coconut palms and the tangle of jungle along the edge of the beach. They set up dinner on the lanai and watched the palms swaying in the moonlight and the moonlight shining on the ocean, the beach utterly deserted, as if they had washed up onto an enchanted island, which they pretty much had.

Harper had taken the photograph of Lana, dressed in a red, hibiscus-print sarong that she’d bought in the airport. They’d gone down to the beach after dinner, carrying a bottle of champagne and two glasses, and on the empty beach there seemed to be no reason at all to go back up after their swimsuits. The rain had started up when they were waist deep in the warm water, and within moments it was coming down so heavily that they couldn’t see their clothes and champagne bottle on the beach, and they had to bend their heads forward to breathe if they didn’t want a nose full of rainwater. Laughing like fools, they slogged ashore and grabbed their stuff, running up to the shelter of the balcony, where they stood watching the downpour. In five minutes it quit, just like that. The night turned warm, and the moon shone in the sky again. Lana had wrapped herself in the sarong, pulled her hair back, and Harper had taken the photo with the palm tree and moon behind her. It was so perfect that it looked staged.

He considered it for another moment, saying nothing. Lana had gone on to other photographs, which she was slipping one-by-one into a big, empty photo annual, happy as she always was when she was busy. He wondered vaguely whether she had meant anything by showing him the photo. Probably she meant that it was a good photo, which it was. Lots of memories in it. On that night in Hana they hadn’t been newlyweds by any means, but there was something about the tropical air and the jungle solitude and the on-and-off rain that had worked a certain magic. Aside from eating and an occasional dip in the ocean after dark, they hadn’t surfaced for three days.

He watched her slide the Hana photo into its niche among the other relics of their past, and then took the newspaper into the den, where he sat down and turned immediately to the weather page, something he did on weekend mornings, checking the five-day forecast, the ocean conditions, and the annual rainfall totals, which were only interesting if it had rained over the course of the week, which of course it hadn’t.

It hadn’t rained since February, according to the paper. There were 2.14 inches total for the year—worse than last year, which had been the second drought year in a row—and half an inch of this year’s rain had fallen ten months ago, in July, for God’s sake, a summer torrent with lightning strikes that had immolated the top of a queen palm two blocks down the street, a bang-up beginning to the rainy season, literally. After that no storm had dropped more than a quarter of an inch. The glory of that wet July morning seemed to Harper to be the recollection of a dream rather than an authentic memory. The photograph of Lana came into his mind, and he realized uneasily that he’d had this same sort of thought twice in a ten-minute span of time.

There were storm clouds in the little weather illustration for Sunday, but Monday was clear and sunny after morning low fog—typical May weather. A hamster could have predicted it, along with more of the same on into June. He found the travel section and laid it aside for Lana, who read every page of it, and then got up and crammed what was left of the paper into the trash. The rest of the news didn’t concern

him, or perhaps concerned him too much. Probably it was vital to know how many people had been murdered over the weekend and what parts of the world were annihilating each other or being annihilated, but he had no good use for the information. Like the weather or the passing of time, there was damn-all he could do about it. Thinking about it simply poisoned the air.

Lana appeared in the doorway. "Did you know that the sprinklers are on?" she asked.

"Probably a prank," he said. "It's those damn Palm Street kids again."

She nodded doubtfully. "They're predicting rain for this morning. A sixty percent chance."

"I don't find their percentages convincing," Harper said. "It's like predicting a man's chances of dying. You can't be wrong forever." He handed her the travel section.

"You're the only person I know who takes the weather personally," she told him. "Just don't think about it. If it doesn't rain then it doesn't rain. Who cares?"

"I guess I do. Like you said."

"Then let's walk down to Hosmer's and get some breakfast—some waffles to sweeten you up."

"All right, but no umbrellas," Harper said, forcing himself to sound enthusiastic. "We'll tempt fate." He got up out of his chair and the two of them went outside. Lana wore a sweatshirt, but he didn't bother with a jacket.

"Is that what's up with the sprinklers?" Lana asked. "It's some kind of challenge? Isn't that what they mean by sympathetic magic?"

"Completely unsympathetic in this case," Harper said. He bent over and shut the sprinkler valve off. The lawn and flowerbeds seemed grateful to him, no longer quite so exhausted. "Think of it as a poor man's way of seeding the clouds."

"You *know* it's crazy not to bring the umbrellas," Lana told him as they started off down the sidewalk.

"I hope so."

"I don't mind carrying one. The sky's *really* getting dark."

"Not half dark enough to suit me," Harper said. "Look, our shadows are still visible." A moment later, their shadows disappeared as if the sky were fixing to prove him wrong. A small breeze lifted a scattering of leaves and blew them down the street. They were nearing the corner now, and in another minute the house would be out of sight behind them. As soon as it was, Lana's obsession with umbrellas would fade. "Waffles sound good," he said, distracting her with food talk. "Waffles and a cup of coffee."

"Decaf?" she asked, looking sideways at him.

"Sure," he said grudgingly. He used to be able to drink coffee all day between naps, but nowadays things were different, and he hated lying awake at night, although as often as not he lay awake anyway.

"Here it comes," she said.

"What?" He looked down the street, but it was empty of cars.

"The *rain*. I just felt a drop."

“It’s just a teaser to work up your anticipation. Then it’ll back off and let you down again.” They walked under the foliage of a big, leafy camphor tree. “Dry as a bone,” he said, but he saw drops of rain on the exposed sidewalk ahead.

“It’s going to *pour*,” she said. “Let’s hurry.”

They picked up the pace, but he was damned if he was going to run. Hosmer’s was two blocks away, at the edge of the downtown—no way they’d drown between here and there even if the alleged storm got serious, which wasn’t likely. The drops were large, but were widely spaced. He looked up and a big drop hit him in the eye. “*Go ahead*,” he muttered.

“What?” Lana asked.

“I said that we should go ahead and walk between the drops. That’s how the Zen masters stay dry.”

“*You* walk between them. I’ll go get us a table.” Lana started jogging on ahead, pulling up the hood on her sweatshirt. When she was fifteen feet away, she turned around and looked back at him, slightly incredulous now. “Are you *coming*?”

“I’ll be there,” he said, the rain picking up. “Get that table!” She turned around again and jogged off without another word. “Out on the patio!” he shouted after her, laughing out loud. He forced himself to walk at a comfortable pace, and by the time he got to the restaurant his shirt was soaked through and his hair was plastered to his head. Lana sat at a table in the window, watching him come up. She looked doubtful, so he smiled at her to show that he had a sense of humor about it all. He brushed his hair back with his fingers and picked up the menu just as the waiter appeared carrying two cups of decaf.

Hosmer’s was full, and there was a pleasant clamor of noise and the smell of bacon and coffee. For a couple of minutes they watched it rain, drinking the hot coffee and waiting for their waffles. It wasn’t a downpour by any means, but it might be the beginning of something. Harper realized again how much he loved the rain, especially when he was inside watching it fall. He winked at his reflection in the glass. “Chalk one up for me,” he said, half to himself.

“You’re such a skeptic,” Lana said. “It’s part of that thing you have for instant gratification.”

“I’ll be gratified if the rain keeps it up for an hour. You see how it’s still dry under the tree out there on the curb? According to the *Farmers Almanac* it’s not measurable rain until it gets down past the foliage. Same with the cars parked on the street. The rainwater’s got to get the street wet enough so that it flows under the cars—no dry spots. Otherwise it means nothing.”

The waffles arrived and they started in on them. Several minutes passed before Harper looked out at the street again, but by this time the rain had stopped. The sidewalk under the curb tree was dry and getting drier. They paid the check and set out for home. Already it was warming up, enough so that Lana took off her sweatshirt and tied it around her waist. The breeze had fallen off, and the clouds were breaking up like a retreating army, easily provoked and easily defeated. Despite Harper’s elevated mood in the café, he couldn’t find much satisfaction in his small victory.

Inside the house again he felt restless, as if the morning were waiting for him to act, and yet he didn’t have the energy to do anything but sit in a chair. In the old days he would have been out in the garage early, accomplishing things, but he had lost most of his jazz in that regard, and anyway he couldn’t think of anything that wanted doing. Lana had started up with the photos again, and she glanced up at him and smiled. He could pitch in and give her a hand, of course, if only for the sake of his image, but the very idea of it made him impatient. He would look through the album later, after Lana had sorted out the good photos.

He left her to her work and went out to cultivate the tomatoes, grabbing a little pointy-tipped hoe out of the garden shed. He cut out the scattered weeds and dragged the loose soil into dams around the plants, which had set on plenty of blooms. Because of the morning's rain, the ground appeared to be wet, but right below the surface it was dry. The clouds were returning—unenthusiastically, it seemed to Harper. Lightning flickered out over the mountains, too far away for him to hear any thunder, a dumb show of an impotent storm. He went to the spigot, turned on the water, and dragged the garden hose back over to the vines, flooding the well around each plant, picturing in his mind the droplets soaking in around the roots, drawn upward through the stems and out into the leaves, the blossoms swelling, the plants noisy with growth.

He made a circuit of the back yard then, watering the flowerbeds heavily, washing the dust off the garage siding and squirting down the walkway. He took a couple of big gulps of hose water, tasting the vinyl in it, and thought about trying to catch raindrops in his mouth when he was a kid. He gave the sky an appraising look, recalling bits from the *Farmers Almanac*—how it had been in the old days when the weather was real weather, when rain fell at the rate of three inches a day and the drops were the size of fifty cent pieces. He returned to the tomatoes to flood the wells again, and then he trained the hose at the sky, so that the water fell back down in big drops, a share of them blowing back in the breeze, showering his face and shoulders, soaking his shoes.

Lana came out onto the back porch, where she stood watching him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that she was smiling, as if she were watching a child playing in the sprinklers. *So what?* he thought. This wasn't her fight; she couldn't be expected to understand it. He quit spraying the sky, though, and was surprised to find that the shower hadn't stopped. It was raining again, as if he had drawn the rain out of the clouds with the hose water.

"I was thinking of making some popcorn," Lana said to him.

He went over to the spigot to crank off the water and then ducked up under the porch roof. "I was making sure the tomatoes got their fair share," he said. "If they get short-changed now, the blooms won't stick."

She nodded. "What about the popcorn? *Road to Singapore* starts in about ten minutes. Maybe you could call some sort of truce with Mother Nature for a couple of hours."

"Actually, I just called her bluff," he said, looking out at the rain. "But I'll give her some time to play her hand."

"I'll get out the Whirley-Pop," she said. "You're in charge of the Dr Pepper."

When Lana came out of the kitchen with the bowl of popcorn, he was standing at the window, dressed in a dry shirt, looking out at a mere drizzle.

"So it *was* a bluff?" she asked, turning on the television.

"An inept bluff. I was more convincing with the damned hose." He smiled at her to show that it was all in good fun, and then helped himself to the popcorn.

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Later they ate enchiladas in front of the television, watching the weatherman yammer away, the doppler radar illuminating green patches on the map, out against the foothills. Supposedly there were clouds coming in off the ocean and a high surf advisory. Waterspouts had appeared off the coast and given everyone a thrill before they spun themselves apart. A film clip started up now, showing a cloudburst out

in the desert, a real gullywasher. A family camping along the Mojave River had been forced to run for high ground when their gear was swept away. The husband had chased after the Styrofoam ice chest, though, wading out into the flood, where he had lost his footing and gone under. If it weren't for the ice chest, which had kept him afloat, he'd be swimming with the fishes now. His wife and three children stood by, the kids mugging for the camera, the wife looking peeved. "No way it was going to get my beer," the man said.

"Good man," Harper said to the screen.

"Low IQ," Lana said. "Maybe his wife looks angry because he didn't drown."

The weatherman promised more rain for tonight and tomorrow, virtually certain. "*More?*" Harper said. "More than *what?* What he means is more of the same." Lana glanced at him doubtfully, as if he might get worked up and throw his fork at the screen. "I'll pull up the drawbridge," he said tiredly, getting up and heading toward the front door. He flipped on the porch light as he did every evening, and then stepped outside and picked up the rain gauge from the seat of the chair. He held it up so that the sky could get a good look at its pitifully empty condition, and then tossed it onto the chair again. That was it for the rain gauge. He'd had it with the mockery. He went back into the house, shut and locked the door, and closed the blinds.

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As usual, Harper awoke in the early morning twilight, listening for something—wind or rain, whatever had disturbed his sleep, but the room was ghostly quiet. After a moment he heard the lonesome wail of a train whistle in the west, the sound falling away and then resuming again until it dwindled in the distance, heading for parts unknown. He found that he was already wide-awake, his mind revolving around matters of unfinished business.

He climbed out of bed quietly, went around and pulled the blanket up over Lana's shoulder, and picked up his pants from the chair. After a moment's thought he dropped them again and stepped across to the dresser where he pulled out his swimsuit and a t-shirt. In the kitchen he took the canister of decaf out of the cupboard, stood looking at it for a moment, and then put it back. He rooted around in the freezer for authentic coffee, which these days they kept mainly for company. He spooned plenty of it into the cone filter and watched the boiling water sink through it, the aroma filling the room. It looked heavy, like used crankcase oil. "That's the stuff," he said, carrying the mug through the living room and out onto the porch. It was too cool outside for swim trunks and a t-shirt, but he didn't give a damn.

The morning sky was a clutter of unmoving clouds. Apparently they were waiting for him. He raised his coffee cup in a salute, feeling the wind through his shirt and the cold concrete on the soles of his feet. He set the mug down and walked along the carport to the garage, where he hauled out a bucket, carwash soap, a sponge, and a couple of terrycloth towels. The problem with pretend rain, among other things, was that it merely splashed the dirt around on a car's finish, magnifying the grime. That's what yesterday's contemptible sprinkles had amounted to—dirt splashes.

Out front again, he turned on the hose and filled the bucket with suds, then played the water over the grill and bumper, softening up the dead bugs and road grime before going on to spray the wheels and the paint. While the car soaked, he drank his coffee and watered the patches of lawn that the sprinklers didn't quite reach. Then he went after the car again, really making a job of it. He had the whole day in front of him. There was no reason he couldn't wash and polish both the cars and still be finished by lunchtime.

When it started to rain, he didn't look up, but simply kept working, soaping down the finish with the

sponge now. The rain was like an irritating fly: if you couldn't swat it, then it was better to ignore it. Sooner or later it would get bored and go away. He rinsed the hood and squirted the whole shebang down again, then grabbed the soapy sponge, opened the car door, and stepped up onto the floorboard in order to reach far enough over the top of the car to get the roof. It was a real stretch, but on tiptoe he could just make it halfway.

Raindrops bounced into his face, and he squinted his eyes, working away with the sponge. There was a bright flash of lightning, close enough to be reflected in the paint, and then the crack of thunder—loud, but he was expecting it, and he didn't give the storm the satisfaction of reacting to it. "Flash in the pan," he muttered, reaching far out with the sponge now, stabbing at a distant spot of dirt that lay on the other side of the imaginary equator. In that moment, while he was off balance and leaning forward on one wet foot, a deluge of water fell from the sky and struck him square in the middle of the back. His foot slipped downward, he cracked his chin on the edge of the car roof, and quicker than seemed possible he found himself on his back on the lawn, lying in a puddle of soapy water that had spilled out of the bucket. The church bells down the street began to chime, as if counting him out, and he hurriedly climbed to his feet, shrugging his shoulders and neck to make sure that he hadn't crushed any vertebrae. His thigh hurt like hell where he had sat down hard on the edge of the bucket, but other than that he was okay.

"That was *it*?" he said to the clouds. Already the rain seemed to be letting up.

"Are you all right?" Lana asked from behind him. She stood on the porch in her bathrobe.

He waved the sponge at her. "No harm, no foul," he said, wondering how long she had been standing there. "Did you see what hit me?"

"It looked like a big crystal ball. It just fell out of the sky."

"*One big drop?*"

"As big as your head. Maybe you should give this up and come inside, Harper. It's no joke, with the lighting and all."

"The best time to wash a car is in the rain," he told her. "It loosens up the dirt and helps rinse away the hard water deposits."

She nodded, as if this made perfect sense. "They usually close down the carwash on rainy days, too," she said, "so you've got no choice, I guess. You've got to do it yourself or it won't get done."

"That's a hell of a good point," he told her, going after the trunk with the sponge. He wondered what she was up to. Irony?

"Maybe you should wear your old wetsuit," she said. "You'd be warmer."

For a moment he actually considered the wetsuit. Probably Lana was kidding, but it made perfect sense, really, except that it would take him an hour to find it. It was part of the mothballed fleet of old stuff hidden away in the garage—his youth, really, packed into a couple of cardboard cartons. He hadn't looked at it in fifteen years, since the last time he had gotten the wild idea of going to the beach. *The wild idea*, he thought, picking up the hose, and there came into his mind a picture of the man on last night's news, leaping into the river to save an ice chest full of beer.

Lana went back inside and shut the door, probably having given up on him. As if on cue, Sharon came out after the *Times*, hurrying along down her driveway. Doc stood on the side porch in his pajamas. He spotted Harper out on the lawn, barefoot in his swim trunks and soaked t-shirt. He noted the hose and

the carwash debris, and waved heartily, his face lighting up. Harper waved back with the hose, swinging it like a lariat, ducking away when a loop of water splashed across him. The boy laughed out loud and ran out into the rain, dancing a jig on the driveway, his face turned toward the sky, his mouth open. Sharon hustled him back onto the porch, giving Harper an angry look, as if he were some kind of rain-drunk pied piper. The boy knew the score, though. Harper had seen it in his eyes.

Lana came outside again, wearing a bathing suit and flip-flops, her hair pinned up. She waved cheerfully at Sharon, who gaped at her, decided to say nothing, and hauled Doc into the house before he was infected with their madness. Harper gaped at Lana, too.

“Now it’s *my* car’s turn,” she said, picking up the bucket and squirting fresh soap into it. “Don’t just stand there.” She grabbed the hose and started to fill the bucket. The rain came down harder now, getting serious. Lana’s car was parked under the carport, so Harper backed his own car out and parked on the street and then backed hers into the open.

The sky had grown evenly dark, a low, iron-gray ceiling. The wind sprang up from the direction of the ocean. It was cold, but Harper didn’t give a damn, and apparently Lana didn’t either. He squirted her Toyota with the hose, but it wasn’t really necessary. The rain was doing the work for him now. Probably it would want a tip when they were through. Harper laughed, trying to think of a way to convey the idea to Lana, but he gave it up and turned off the hose, then dipped a towel into the soapy water and helped Lana with the hood.

“You’re right about the rain loosening up the dirt,” she said. “You sounded like a crazy person, though.”

“But I’m not, am I?”

“The jury’s still out on that one.” She kissed him. “You’re soapy.” She wiped her mouth with her arm. “You get that side and I’ll get this one.”

She bent over and disappeared from view, working on the rims. Harper did the same. He discovered that he was whistling the theme song from “Steamboat Willy,” but he couldn’t remember having started it up. He was right in tune, though, and so he raised the volume a little, stood back, and snapped the towel at a smudge of grit, cleaning it off in one blow like whichever Jack it was who had killed the flies.

Abruptly the rain got heavier, redoubling its strength in an instant, and he staggered just a little as the wind caught him. He recovered, steadied himself, and went on to the door panels now, soaping the hell out of them and then standing back a couple of feet again. “Go ahead and rinse it,” he shouted at the sky.

“What?” Lana said. She looked at him across the trunk, shielding her face with her hand.

“I was talking to the rain,” Harper shouted at her.

“Is it listening?”

“Seems like it!”

They both worked on the trunk and the rear bumper, although by now it was raining so hard that the dirt had been scoured off. They had to stand with their backs to the storm. Rain was driving down at an angle, surging through the air in heavy, blowing clouds, sweeping the soapy water off the car and down the driveway. Lana picked up the bucket and went out to the curb to dump out the dirty water while Harper grabbed the soap and sponge and towels. He dropped them into the bucket and Lana carried it to the carport, in no apparent hurry. He watched her happily, very happily.

She was on her way back down the driveway when there was a bolt of lightning so close that it

enveloped them in a cosmic, white glow. Harper felt his hair stand on end, and there was a shattering blast of thunder that shook the car. It was a moment before he could see again, and then only dimly through the rain, which was torrential now. The curb trees waved frantically along the street, and the roses shed petals in a whirlwind of white that was driven down onto the lawn. Lana stood at the hood of the car, steadying herself with one hand, half-hidden by a white mist of shattered water. Harper shrugged at her, as if he had seen worse. Abruptly it did get worse, the rain slanting down in sheets. Lana shouted something and headed around toward him, but the wind snatched her words away.

“Now *that’s* rain,” Harper shouted when she was close enough to hear. He yanked the door open and she slid into the car, the wind nearly tearing the door handle out of Harper’s hand. He hunched around to the driver’s side and climbed in beside her. They sat together listening to the storm drumming away outside, catching their breath. He turned the key in the ignition and switched the heater and the wipers on.

“You really look phenomenal,” he said to her breathlessly.

“Thanks,” she said, kissing him again. Then she looked down at herself skeptically and hastily arranged her bathing suit top. “Why didn’t you tell me that I wasn’t ladylike?”

“Do you have to ask?” He winked at her. “What would Sharon say if we...”

“I was thinking we’d take a little Sunday drive.”

“Now? Dressed like this?”

“Not exactly like this,” she said, reaching behind the seat and coming up with her sweatshirt. “Your carry-on bag is behind you on the floor.”

He turned around and looked. Sure enough, there it was. He could see the toes of his shoes beneath it, and his jacket was tucked neatly through the handles. Lana’s bag was there too, shoved in behind the passenger seat along with her purse.

“When did you pack?” Harper asked.

“This morning,” she said. “I sneaked the bags out the back door and down the carport. I was thinking about a hotel. Maybe that place just this side of Ventura, right on the beach there.” She raised her eyebrows at him.

He pictured the hotel they’d stayed in on the first night of their honeymoon. It had been storming then too, the ocean a spectacular chaos of breaking waves, the sky full of tearing clouds. He didn’t remember a lot about it beyond that. They hadn’t spent a lot of time looking out the window. “Will we need a reservation?” he asked, shifting into reverse and backing out of the driveway.

“In weather like this?” she asked.

The rainwater was up over the curb now, the street a river. He swerved around onto the empty highway, suddenly anxious to get out of town, keeping to the center of the street, which wasn’t flooded yet. The road was clear, the freeway dead ahead.

“What’s that?” Lana asked as they drove up the onramp. She pointed out her window toward the west.

Harper stared past her at a dark blur in the distance, something that looked like a rapidly approaching squall. Suddenly it spun itself into the shape of a waterspout, rose into the air, and tore along above the rooftops, as if bound for their very neighborhood a half-mile away.

“A couple more minutes, and it’ll know we ran for it,” Lana said, apparently serious.

“Then it’s a good thing we brought the umbrellas,” Harper told her. Laughing, he switched the wipers onto high, checked the rear-view mirror, and accelerated into the fast lane.