

When the Sun is Setting in California

by

Larry Rothe

When the sun is setting in California, sending current through the clouds aglow in lavender and peach above the Golden Gate, Laura and Rick Chalmers are fast asleep in Bridgeport, Connecticut, where distant thunder is collecting in the cave of Ursa Major. From the open deck of Sabella's in Tiburon, constellations dot the sky over Oakland, while the last light of land hovers farther toward the Pacific and sea clouds fade like desiccated vapor trails—of jets already crossing the Sierra, rushing to meet the dawn. On the deck, as the contours of Angel Island sink into the Bay, the woman from Marin, a purple headband around her temples, face flushed as the passing sunset, toasts the waitress with another glass of champagne and demands an answer: "Isn't it fun to have fun?" The thunder wakes Rick, who feels Laura's head nestling in his armpit and smells the odor of dust filling the room. The rain triples its intensity. When the lightning smashes its glass against the black screen, the images flare from walls, dresser, mirror, sheets. Laura's face bursts like a bud thrusting white petals toward the night. Rick feels the exhalation of her nostrils warm and moist against his skin. He slips from under her and, at the open window, watches the rain twist between the sky and ground, drilling with a pressure that forces mists from the pavement and the roofs of cars, draws halos across concrete and metal, explaining the process of erosion. The breeze comes cool against his thighs. "Can't even answer a simple question. Well, I think it's perfectly, wonderfully, fantastically, and excruciatingly fun—fun fun fun fun fun—to have fun." The woman tears off her headband and hurls it across the wooden railing into the Bay, where in the narrow apron of light cast from the shore it bobs for a moment, joins a cluster of kelp between the moored hulls, then floats out toward the pit where from time to time a red light and a green light are suspended in the darkness; from the pit, a gust sweeps the woman's hair and rushes past her ears like breath across the mouth of a bottle. She moves to the railing and leans across. "Are you alright?" Laura turns, lifts herself on an elbow. The rain has slackened to a drizzle. "Just the rain," he tells her.

“I think the heat wave’s broken. Go back to sleep.” The woman thinks she sees her reflection ripple through the water below her. “Oh, God, having fun isn’t always fun. I feel terrible. Let’s go. Oh, sweetie. Let’s go.” Rick comes to bed. He puts an arm around Laura’s shoulder, and in the palm of his hand he feels as he strokes her skin how smooth and elastic her body is, how warm its folds. The drapes part from the windowpane in the breeze. He thinks of the stars. He hears—he thinks it is coming from the west—a distant growl in the clouds, like a jet’s engines grinding air. Young and strong, he’s happy—a man with a grip on things and a sense of where he’s going. In the moment before he sleeps again, he thinks about the world and the things he loves—his wife, coral at the bottom of turquoise water jellied with quivering daylight from above, the music of a flute in the forest at midnight, and the alchemy of souls: a gilding of the spirit he feels in the final minutes when the sky ignites and plays itself out, refining the air for darkness and the patternwork of his dreams, due to assume their shapes about that time when the sun is setting in California.

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