

RON MILHOAN

Winter Poplars, 2013
oil on wood panel, 18 x 24 in



credit: R.Blitzer Gallery

ANDREA LEWIS

Elytra

I was kissing Maureen Lautigan when I was paged to Central Office. She wasn't kissing me back, but she wasn't resisting either. It was a Friday in October after last bell. The students had streamed out of school like a bison stampede, leaving the twang of sudden quiet in the halls. I found Maureen alone in the teachers' lounge, amid the liver-brown sofas and limp *Newsweeks* and the stale reek of a million cigarettes. She was standing by the window, looking sad, her short coppery hair bathed in a cone of sepia light from the nicotine-sheened glass. The whole faculty knew that over the summer she had obtained a long-awaited divorce from her lady-killer husband, a guy who drove around Lancaster, California, in a cucumber-green panel truck emblazoned with the name of his landscaping business—*RAKES*.

Maureen was wearing a white blouse and a navy-blue skirt. Her silver stopwatch glinted from a cord around her neck. She taught typing and shorthand and the stopwatch was for the timed dictation she gave her classes. When I found her in the teachers' lounge, she was digging in her purse, probably for cigarettes. I set her purse aside, took her hands in mine and kissed her cheek. I had spent the last two years gazing at her, so she knew I liked her. I was too nervous to kiss her lips. I was shaking.

Then the PA speaker above our heads squawked to life: *Mr. Mallory, report at once to Central Office. Mr. Jack Mallory.*

I looked up at the speaker, mystified. "Why do they want me in Central Office?"

Maureen took out a Salem and lit it. "See what happens when you're bad?"

Barbara Leavitt, school secretary, all five feet and ninety pounds of her, ruled Central Office like the dictator of a strategic island nation. "Problem," she whispered, leaning over her typewriter. She took me into a little side room that I never knew existed, though I'd taught biology at Quartz Hill High for fourteen years. At a small oak table sat the school counselor, Hugh Crampton—the kids called him Cramps—and Mrs. Zachirias, the mother of one of my students. Mrs. Zachirias was crying. Her mouth was all distorted, as if she were trying to dislodge a poison banana she had eaten by accident, and her tears had siphoned into the runnels of her face. Her son, Peter Zachirias, was the top student of Quartz Hill High, destined to be the valedictorian of the class of '76 graduating next June.

I liked him enough
that when he asked
to come along on
my beetle-hunting
trips I let him.

“Mr. Mallory.” Mrs. Zachirias gripped one of my hands in both of hers. She felt damp and desperate. “You are Peter’s favorite teacher.” She had told me this before when she came to my classroom seeking college recs for Peter. And Peter was, in fact, one of my favorite students. I had had him last year in Biology One and this year in Biology Two, where his line drawings of our shark dissection were worthy of an anatomy text. I liked it that he didn’t snicker when I wrote *cloaca* or *testes* on the board. I liked him enough that when he asked to come along on my beetle-hunting trips I let him. And when he asked me to sponsor the computer club he was starting I said yes, even though I knew nothing about computers.

Crampton cleared his throat, smoothed his too-short burgundy tie over his stomach, and opened a pumpkin-colored file folder. “We have a situation,” he said. I think he was ex-military, probably near retirement, and I felt sorry for him.

“My son is not a situation,” Mrs. Zachirias yelled.

In the outer office, Barbara Leavitt got up and closed the door to the room.

Mrs. Zachirias lowered her voice. “He is a good boy.” More tears seeped into the channels of her crumpled face.

Cramps turned to me. “The boy seems to be having thoughts of suicide.” He looked gratified imparting this professional assessment.

“Is he all right?”

“He is in the hospital!” Mrs. Zachirias was close to hysteria. “How can he be all right?”

“I mean, did he, you know—”

“Of course not,” she shrieked.

“It’s for observation,” Cramps added. “One of the PE teachers found some things he had written, and spoke with the boy and then came to me.”

Mrs. Zachirias made a sound like *pfffft* in Crampton’s direction. She turned back to me and grabbed my hand again. “Mr. Mallory, you’ve been like a father to him. Will you speak with him?”

I had probably edged too close to father-figure status with Peter. One of the first things his mother had ever said to me was *Peter’s father died many years ago*. Now I looked at Cramps and said, “What do you think?”

Mrs. Zachirias went *pfffft* again and it seemed to be settled.

When I emerged from the secret side room, Barbara Leavitt handed me a folded slip of paper that I suspected was from Maureen Lautigan. I put it in my pocket and Barbara said, “Aren’t you going to read it?”

“What does it say, Barb?”

Barbara sniffed. “It says she’ll wait for you in her classroom.” She rolled a sheet of paper into her typewriter. “We’re all pulling for you, you know.”

“Am I that transparent?” I asked.

“Yes, Jack. You are.” She started typing so fast it sounded like artillery fire.

Though I had tried to hide my attraction to Maureen, I had been greeted at the start of this school term with friendly faculty call-outs of *Maureen’s free now!* (the women) or the cruder *Ready to move on Maureen?* (the men). One day, early in the term, I stood outside Maureen’s classroom, eavesdropping while she gave dictation. She measured the pace of her words against the stopwatch while twenty girls slashed shorthand curlicues onto their steno pads. *Dear Mr. McAllister, I am in receipt of your letter of February 24th*. Every syllable was round and enunciated. Something about it turned me on. *How will the acquisition affect financial performance question mark*. And she had a way of saying esses with a little extra sibilance that I loved. Even the way she cradled the stopwatch in her palm was sexy.

Now I found her in her classroom, walking slowly down a row of blue IBM Selectric typewriters, making sure they were all turned off.

I went in and closed the door. “It’s Peter Zachirias. He’s in the hospital.”

Maureen nodded. “He’s okay?” She knew not to ask too much.

“I think so.” I was still across the room from her, not sure what to do.

She flicked the on/off rocker switch of the nearest blue Selectric, back and forth. The machine briefly hummed to life, silenced, hummed to life.

I went to her desk and flipped open the battered burnt-sienna cover of her Gregg Shorthand Workbook. I mimed a stopwatch click and pretended to read from the book, using her slow, measured voice: *Dear Beautiful Lady Teacher, I am in receipt of your letter begging me to take you out for a margarita*. I checked the imaginary stopwatch and glanced at Maureen. She was almost smiling. *While I am very busy with important biology-teacher... stuff, I’ve decided today is the day. May I have your reply now question mark*.

Maureen leaned over and braced her hands on the sides of the Selectric. “Okay,” she said. “You can stop.”

“Okay?” I asked. “Tonight? A drink?”

She nodded.

“I have to see Peter in the hospital,” I said. “I’ll pick you up afterward, at your place.”

Maureen reached for a piece of paper. “I’ll write down my address.”

“Maureen, I know your address.”

* * *

Peter Zachirias was in the psychiatric ward of Antelope Valley Medical Center. I hated Antelope Valley Medical Center. My wife Claudia had died there twelve years ago in the oncology wing. Thirty years old. Pancreatic cancer. I hated passing the blue-and-white H posted on the freeway exit and I hated the medical center’s vast parking lot, where years ago I had wheeled my car in a fog of tears and sleep deprivation. I hated the sighing glass doors, the shock of air conditioning, and the never-ending monotone of pages on the PA. I hated the color-coded signs with their peach and turquoise and mauve arrows. I hated the stratified odor in the air, its top-note of paper towels and sick flowers, its midrange of isopropyl alcohol and bleach, its bottom layer of lemon Jell-O and urine. Most of all, I hated the ubiquitous saltwater aquariums which, I assume, I don’t really know for sure, are meant to make frantic visitors feel—what?—serene? sedated? anesthetized?

The psychiatric ward’s aquarium was a doozy—a monolith in the middle of the waiting room—with three blue tangs, three orange flame angels, and a bunch of knife-thin butterfly fish darting around underwater castles and strands of seaweed. At the bottom of the tank a little pirate chest spilled miniature pearls and gold coins onto the pink pebbles of the ocean floor. A determined-looking aquanaut, attached to a bubbling hose, was frozen mid-stride on his way to the sunken treasure.

At the desk, they were expecting me. They said Peter would come out to “visit.” I sat on a sofa and was picking up a sticky issue of *People* when Peter appeared from around the aquarium.

“Hi, Mr. Mallory.” He looked much the way he usually did except for white terry-cloth slippers, a hospital ID bracelet, and no belt. The trio of electric-blue tangs lined up near the aquarium glass and wriggled their tails, as if in greeting.

“Pete.” I stuck out my hand, wondering why the hell I said *Pete*. I had never called Peter *Pete* in his life.

Peter shook hands and looked around as if the sofas might be mined. He had on a wrinkled oxford shirt in robin’s-egg blue, partly tucked into his jeans. His straight brown hair fell in a diagonal line across his forehead. He was already six feet tall and he still hadn’t grown into his long arms and big hands. When finally he did sit, he hunched forward and clenched his fists in his crotch as if enduring a freezing rain at a bus stop.

“I knew Mom would make you come,” he said. “Sorry.”

“She didn’t make me,” I lied.

I suddenly realized I had no idea what to say to him. What note to strike. Casual? *How’s it going?* Stern? *Do you know how worried your mother is?* Fatherly? *Let’s talk, son*. Teacherly? *Ready for that quiz on Monday?* What I really wanted to say was: *You’re seventeen and you’re brilliant! What the fuck are you thinking?*

But suicide hadn’t been that far from my own mind after Claudia died. I knew what it felt like to believe in the bliss of nonexistence. The option that makes all the other options obsolete. The decision that requires no more deciding.

We sat there and watched the fish. A flame angel quivered under an archway in one of the castles. A blue tang zoomed over in a neon streak and smacked it snout-on-

snout. It broke the spell and I blurted, “Season’s coming up for rain beetles.”

“Man, we gotta get out there,” Peter said. In that moment, he sounded normal and enthusiastic. Maybe by accident I had found a good topic. On our collecting trips, Peter had quickly picked up the workings of fall traps and beat sheets. Last spring he found a *Scobicia declivis*, or short-circuit beetle, in a fallen palm near the Lancaster city dump. A truly rare find. He wanted to give it to me, but I showed him how to mount it and made him keep it.

“Do you remember where all the traps are?” We had trekked through some meadows in Tehachapi Pass over the summer, setting fall traps for the beetles that come out to breed after the autumn rains.

Peter smiled and tapped his temple. “Yes, sir, it’s all up here.” Just as abruptly the smile vanished and he said, “Along with a lot of other shit.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Fuck, man, I don’t know.”

One of the butterfly fish was trailing a whitish thread of excrement, looking vaguely embarrassed.

“Does everything feel like... you know... too much or something?”

“Nice try, Mr. Mallory, but they have guys here who already asked me that.”

“So, what did you say?”

Peter rubbed his palms hard, back and forth on his knees. “I made something up.”

“You lied?”

“Isn’t everything a lie?”

“I hope not.” My mind was wandering to Maureen. Was she home now? Dressing for our date?

“If you feel one way”—Peter turned up his right palm—“and two seconds later you feel a different way”—he turned up the left—“then is one a lie?”

“How do you feel right now?” I asked.

“I mean it, Mr. Mallory, you could work here.”

“And miss the chance to teach fine boys and girls about angiosperms and gymnosperms?”

Peter returned to bus-stop position. “I see your point.”

“Not to mention all the fun of the Circuit Riders,” I said.

“Yeah, let’s not mention it.”

The Circuit Riders were the computer club: Peter and his only friend Mitch and an extremely bright sophomore girl named Kimberly. We were building one of the new home computers from a mail-order kit.

“What do you mean? I thought you loved it.”

“It’s fucked.” Peter flattened his hands on the top of his head, as if calming a volcano.

“Well, I grant you, Mitch is a little weird...” I was trying to humor him, and he did smile, he even laughed.

“Yes.” He curved his fingers into claws, the mad scientist. “Mitch is cray-zay.”

“And look how fast Kimberly caught on.”

Peter went from laughing to stone-faced. He hunched over again until his forehead was almost on his knees. A sound came out of him, something between a sob and a groan.

“What?” I said.

“Kimberly fucking hates me.”

Kimberly was one of those beautiful girls who either didn’t realize she was beautiful or pretended not to care. She didn’t mind being smart, either. I had seen her toting around *The Second Sex* and *The Red and the Black*. She wore no makeup and her hair was a glossy shoulder-length chestnut brown. She joined the Circuit Riders that first day, the day the computer kit arrived, the only student to respond to Peter and Mitch’s announcement of the club. Peter and Mitch, usually the best of pals, couldn’t resist vying for her favor in their own nerd-world ways: Peter by expounding on the Intel 8080 Instruction Set, Mitch by wielding his soldering iron in an unconscious display of phallic enthusiasm. Kimberly ignored these androgen-based blandishments and directed all her questions to me. I usually had to defer back to the boys, who knew much more about Boolean algebra, transistors, and NAND gates than I did.

Peter flopped back against the sofa cushions. “I made this big, honking mistake,” he said.

Oh, Peter, get used to making mistakes with girls.

“I never should have told her I liked her.” He covered his eyes to block the horror of the memory.

“That was your mistake? Telling her you liked her?”

“I’m a total dickhead.” He banged one fist on his forehead.

“What did she say?”

“She said she was going to graduate early and get into college. I think it’s called *changing the subject*.”

“There’s nothing wrong with telling a lady you like her.”

Peter took up *People* and gazed at Raquel Welch on the cover. “Have you told Mrs. Lautigan?”

“Shit,” I said. “Am I really that obvious?”

He flipped pages. “We’re all pulling for you, Mr. Mallory. Really.”

“Forget Mrs. Lautigan. We are not talking about Mrs. Lautigan.”

Peter tossed the magazine aside. “It’s just that Mitch and I saw you and Mrs. L in the parking lot that day.”

“*What* day?”

“Let’s see. Last week sometime. You should tell her to lose that car of hers. Even the nerds think it’s pathetic.”

Maureen drove a Mercury Bobcat painted Crayola “Flesh.” I had walked her to her car that day and stood talking to her, trying to work up the nerve to ask her out but failing. Instead I just stared at her stopwatch. She said to me, “You’re too thin,” and ran her fingertips across the extra belt holes that marked my slow weight loss since Claudia died. I finally did pick up the stopwatch from between her breasts and cradled it in my palm. She gave me a slit-eyed look and gently took it back.

“You and Mitch were spying on me?” I asked.

“For your own safety,” Peter said.

“Why is it that during class you kids sleep or comb your hair or pass notes or gouge desks or read *Playboy* or pick your noses and never once look at me, and then after class notice everything I do?”

Peter closed his eyes and thought. “I have never in my life passed a note,” he said.

A young man with red hair, a pocket protector and a photo ID badge—Dr. Brad Simms—came into the waiting room. “Peter?” He held out one arm. “We should go.”

“Okay, Doc.” Peter stood.

Dr. Simms introduced himself and I asked when Peter would be released. “Oh, we like him. We’re keeping him for a while.” Big professional smile.

“Can he go out? We’ve got beetles to collect.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow morning?”

“I think we could arrange that.” Slow professional nod.

The doctor was already herding Peter down the hall-

way, but I called out, “I’ll pick you up tomorrow, Pete.” Close to the glass, a butterfly fish gave me the eye. *Pete?*

* * *

On the freeway, heading back to Lancaster and Maureen’s house, I was stuck for an hour in Friday traffic. Far off to the northwest, above the gold and dun high-desert floor, clouds gathered along the Tehachapi Mountains. If it rained overnight, it would be a perfect morning for rain beetles. I thought about Peter and Kimberly and the Circuit Riders’ meetings. I hadn’t expected to enjoy them, but I did. On the first day, we unpacked the computer kit: empty blue metal cabinet, bare circuit boards, plastic baggies of red and yellow resistors, boxes of olive-green capacitors and dark red LEDs. We flipped through the manuals and looked at topics like “Assembly” and “Theory of Operation.” Peter and Mitch were the experts, having built model rockets and ham radios. Kimberly, watchful but silent, took the manuals home and came to the second meeting familiar with everything from voltage jumper connections to Baudot interface circuitry.

That second meeting, we took turns soldering resistors onto one of the printed circuit boards. Mitch informed us that this board was properly called the motherboard. He owned our soldering gun, which he treated with the deference one might show a diamond drill. “Always wipe the tip off on the damp sponge,” he said, demonstrating the move and looking gratified at the resulting hiss of steam.

I soldered my first resistor crooked, causing Mitch to nod wearily and say, “Keep practicing.” Kimberly soldered two perfect resistors in quick succession, even lifting the board and peering on-edge like an expert to make certain they were flush. Peter attended her like a lovesick acolyte. She would say *Wire cutters* as if they were deep into brain surgery, and Peter would thwack them into her palm. When Kimberly paused to gather her hair into a ponytail, Peter held the soldering iron for her, gazing so blissfully as she drew her thick locks through the rubber band that he could have soldered his belt buckle to his belly button without noticing. When Kimberly decided on her own to attach a capacitor, Mitch proclaimed, “We’re not ready for capacitors.” Peter socked him in the biceps and said, “Back off, asshole. She’s good at this.”

My palms were sweating on the steering wheel when I finally slowed in front of Maureen’s house under the almost-dark evening sky. The place looked buttoned up, as if she had left on vacation. No lights, drawn drapes, and a rolled-up newspaper on the front walk. I knocked, rang the bell, and even walked around the back, wondering if the stupid kiss on the cheek that afternoon had scared her off. I sat in the car for a while, but worried someone would call the cops.

I went home, feeling as low as I had since Claudia died and in no mood to see Peter the next day. Two suicidal guys running around the hills looking for *Pleocomma australia*? I barely turned on the lights, not wanting to eat, not wanting to see my walls lined with their lonely décor—Schmidt cases of indigenous California beetles. I went to bed early, wondering how I would contact Peter in the morning to cancel our outing.

At midnight my doorbell rang three times and it was Maureen. She had on jeans and a sweatshirt and her stopwatch. In one hand she held something called Salud! Margarita Mix and in the other a slope-shouldered bottle of Patrón Tequila.

“Forgive me?” she asked.

“What’s the stopwatch for?”

“You.”

Later, after we each had a margarita and shared a third, I took the stopwatch off over her head and she blushed. I took her sweatshirt off and hugged her in her white bra to my chest, backing her towards the bedroom.

“I have to warn you,” I said into her neck. I felt her body tense.

“Please don’t tell me you have lawns to mow in the morning.”

“No,” I said. “But I have beetles to collect. Will you come with us?”

“Who’s going?”

“I’m taking Peter Zachirias.”

She pulled back and looked at me. “Are you sure? With a student?”

“He’s already on to us.” I finally kissed her lips.

* * *

In the morning, Maureen moved around my kitchen as if she had always lived there. When she stood staring

at one of the Schmidt cases, I came up behind her and kissed her copper-colored hair. “See anything you like?” I asked.

“They’re gorgeous,” she said. She turned and put her arms around my waist. “You’re strange. But they’re gorgeous.”

She found my old thermos bottle and started filling it with hot tea. It reminded me of Claudia and I almost stopped breathing. Claudia always filled the thermos before we went on outings. What was it about thermoses and women anyway? Something about comfort and caring. Or about anticipation, looking forward to the day. Maybe that’s what I missed most. That and passing a black plastic thermos cap of hot tea back and forth.

On the way to Antelope Valley Medical Center, I stole glances at Maureen, her profile framed against the pale blue sky and distant hills. She caught me looking at her and blushed so beautifully I wanted to pull the car over and neck. She cradled the thermos in her lap and kept checking that the cap was tight.

In the psychiatric ward, Peter was standing by the fish tank, talking with Kimberly. She had on a dandelion-yellow anorak and khaki shorts with green rubber boots.

“Kim’s coming with us, okay?” Peter said.

The fish were swimming giddily back and forth. *Kim?*

We drove north for an hour out of Lancaster toward Tehachapi Pass. The bare stretches of tan, sandy earth gradually changed to rolling fields of grass and shrubs as we gained elevation. I parked at the same trailhead Peter and I had used over the summer when we set the traps. We started climbing through scrubby piñon and chaparral. It had rained, but now the sun beat down and Kimberly got stuck pulling off her anorak. Peter helped her, turning pink with the effort, but having the grace to smooth her hair down for her and carry the anorak himself.

After an hour we reached sparse forests of sugar pine and blue oak. Behind me, I heard Kimberly say, “I’m so glad you called me.” I wondered if Peter had had to ask Brad Simms first. I decided I liked Dr. Simms.

Here and there, the forests opened onto meadows. Peter indeed remembered where all the traps were. The first one held a male black rain beetle, almost an inch long.

“This is perfect,” I said. “This guy probably flew around before dawn, found a girlfriend, accomplished his life’s work, and died. Or is about to.”

“What a hero,” Peter said.

Fine hairs bristled out from the beetle’s underside, and a tiny shovel-like clypeus extended from his head. His antennae groped feebly in a postcoital death throe.

Maureen and Kimberly knelt with Peter on the soft, damp earth. Peter pulled the homemade trap from the soil. It was a pork-and-beans can with the soaked label still on and some rotting apple peels in the bottom. I handed him a small pair of forceps.

“See, Kim?” Peter said. “These are the elytra.” He nudged one of the leathery reddish-black wing covers from the beetle’s back with the forceps.

“Ella-tra,” she repeated. “Those are the wings?”

“No, they’re the wing covers. The flying wings are underneath.” He pulled a wing cover up and away to reveal the iridescent film of the flight wing folded below. “The flight wings are almost invisible,” he said. “When he flies, the wing covers lift up and the flight wings stretch out.”

On cue, the rain beetle spread its elytra like a miniature Dracula cape and tried to lift its real wings in flight. But its energy was exhausted, and it collapsed and lay still at the bottom of the can.

“Oh, did he die?” Kimberly asked.

“He only lives to breed,” Peter said. “Like Mr. Mallory said, mission accomplished.”

We walked a two-mile loop and caught five more rain beetles and two ironclads and put them in killing bottles. Peter caught a tiny rufous water beetle from a stream and raced me to identify it from the books I had brought along. “*Hydrosapha natans*,” Peter called out in triumph.

“Way to go,” Kimberly said.

Elated, Peter said, “I can mount it for you.” Kimberly smiled and shook her head.

On our way back to the car, I pulled Peter ahead of Maureen and Kimberly. “How is Dr. Simms?”

“Is that code for *When do you get out?*” Peter asked.

“Wow,” I said. “You could work there.”

Peter laughed. “I get to go home on Monday. I have to see him every week.”

“And Kimberly?”

“I have to see her every week too.” Peter shook one of the killing bottles and peered into it. The two ironclads looked like bumpy lumps of dirt.

“Shouldn’t you be asking her to homecoming or something?”

“Mr. Mallory, I’m a nerd. No homecoming.”

“Okay, a movie. Greasy food. A make-out session.”

He glanced back at Kimberly and lowered his voice. “Which do you recommend?”

“I don’t know. What do nerds *do* these days?”

“I can’t really divulge that, sir. It’s classified. Way above your level.”

“Probably for the best.” I glanced back too. Maureen, thermos dangling from one hand, was rimmed in insect-flecked golden light. An hour ago I had almost cried when we sat on a flat rock and she handed me the black plastic cup of steaming tea.

“Speaking of nerds,” Peter said, “how are *you* doing?”

“Doing great,” I said. It came out more forcefully than I intended, which wasn’t lost on Peter.

He cut me a sly look. “Did I mention we’re all pulling for you?”

“You did.” I put my hand on the base of Peter’s neck and gripped tendon and muscle, taut and alive. “And I’m grateful.”

Andrea Lewis writes short stories and essays from her home on Vashon Island, Washington. Her work has appeared in *Cutthroat*, *Harpur Palate*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, and elsewhere. She is the winner of the *Thin Air* 2011 Genre Blur Contest, and two of her stories have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. More of her work is available at www.andrealewis.org. She is one of the founders of Richard Hugo House, a community center devoted to writers in Seattle, Washington.