

A  
MAP  
OF  
THE  
EDGE

THE ISAAK COLLECTION  
DAVID T. ISAAK

*A Map of the Edge*

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# 1

## CITRUS TREES IN SERRIED RANKS

I remember her at the breakfast table on that last morning, spooning out our scrambled eggs, the left side of her face bruised from jaw to ear. If the mark hadn't been so obvious, maybe everything would have been different—but how could she go to the supermarket with a purpling palm-print for everyone to see?

Of course, it wasn't the first time Dad had hit Mom, but in the see-no-evil, hear-no-evil world of Southern California in the mid-sixties, they'd always kept it hidden: mostly behind the bedroom door, and always below the neck. Everyone, even she, could pretend nothing had happened; just no swimsuits or sundresses for a while.

Perhaps she would have stayed if I'd done something, or at least tried to do something. Sure, I was only eleven, but I knew he was hurting her, and I felt gutless and guilty that morning as I sat at the silent breakfast table, my nose in a book.

So at some level it felt like justice when she vanished, taking my brother Michael, aged six, and my baby sister Becky, but leaving me behind with Dad.

It was years before I understood the real reason I was abandoned, though it was literally staring me in the face.



“He’s acting out,” the school counselor said about my behavior in the months after Mom left. “He’s just expressing frustration at his sense of abandonment.”

“This misbehavior—the shoplifting, the fights, the truancy, the vandalism—these are all attempts to seek punishment,” the County psychologist said two years later, addressing a group of school administrators as though I wasn’t in the room. “Just as in a divorce, the child blames himself for the loss of a parent. Rick blames himself for his mother leaving the family.”

She was wrong. I didn’t blame myself, I blamed Dad.

By 1969, when I turned fifteen, the two of us had discarded any pretense of trying to get along. I’d let my hair grow long, despite Dad’s constant threats to cut it by force, but even Samson-haired and stoned most of the time, I was far from being a hippie. No, my idols were the local Chicano street punks.

We lived in Redlands, California, but Dad’s egg ranch had been over in Highland...until it went bankrupt. His new job might have been the only thing that saved us from murdering each other. A former competitor, Andrews Egg Ranches, hired him on to run their swing shift up in Yucaipa, 5 p.m. to midnight, supervising the cleanup crews and the packing houses. As soon as the plant closed, he’d speed to the bar to get in an hour and forty minutes of drinking before they closed at 2 a.m. At most, our schedules only overlapped for an hour or two a day; at best, we didn’t see each other at all.

I’d fool around after school—on the days when I bothered to go there at all—until he left for work around four in the afternoon. If the truck was still in the driveway, I’d take a walk or hide in a neighboring yard until it was gone.

A few days after my fifteenth birthday, it happened.

I waited next door in the Turners’ yard, shielded by their camellias, and watched his Ford pickup back out of the drive and angle hard into the road. As always, he revved the engine in neutral between shifting from reverse to first.

After the truck disappeared down the street I went into the house and took a shower. I dried off, wrapped the towel around my waist, and stepped into the hallway.

## A MAP OF THE EDGE

I didn't see him standing there until he grabbed me by the hair from my left side. He pulled so hard I nearly fell over.

As I fought to keep my balance, he jammed a hand up close to my scalp and I heard, and felt, the unique scrunching sound of hair being cut.

I pushed hard at his chest and he staggered back. He stood there, breathing hard, kitchen shears in one hand and a footlong hank of damp hair in the other.

"You *fucker*," I said, more amazed than angry.

"Come on," he said, as if we were going somewhere. He stepped toward me.

I ran for my bedroom, stumbling as the towel on my waist fell around my ankles. I slammed the door behind me so hard it bounced back open, hit the wall, and nearly shut itself again. My fingers patted the left side of my head: a big patch of damp stubble. "Fuck!" I brought my hand away, and it was covered with blood. "*You sonofabitch!*" I shouted, so loud my voice cracked.

He pushed open the door with the toe of his workboot. "Hair's comin' off. Today."

It had been years since I'd played baseball, but my Louisville Slugger still leaned in the corner, and I picked it up, smearing the handle red. "I'll kill you," I said, and was surprised to find I was crying.

He took a step into the room. "Put it down." Another step. "We can do it like this, or you can put on some clothes and we can go to a barbershop. Your choice."

My voice trembled. "Get out of here." The tears on my face began to drop onto my chest and roll down, and I remembered I was naked.

"It's *my* house, and I'm your father. Now come on." One more step into the room.

"You're not my father," I said, and hefted the bat over my shoulder. "You're some kinda goddamn freak."

He stopped and exhaled through his nose, a controlled little sound, as if a doctor had probed a tender spot. "Oh," he said, "I'm your father, all right." He almost smiled. "In fact, you're my only son."

I stared.

He looked down at the shears in his hand as if they were some alien artifact, then looked up at me again. “Why do you think she left you here?”

I swallowed, tried to speak, and had to swallow again. “Not true...” I said.

“Oh, it’s true.” His mouth smiled now, a joyless upturning of the lips. He opened his mouth to say something more, and then simply shrugged.

He turned and shambled from the room. From the hallway his retreating voice said, “Take a long look in the mirror, kid. It’s you and me.”

I let the bat fall to the floor to join what he’d dropped there: kitchen shears and a handful of my hair.



After his truck drove away I stumbled to the bathroom. My scalp wound was only a nick, but the bloodflow was spectacular. It took forever to stanch the bleeding.

The bright-pink Band-Aid—how can they call that color *flesh*?—sat at the center of a three-inch circle of short, uneven hair, high on the left side of my head. I tried tossing strands of my remaining hair over the naked spot, but my hair was still damp, and there was no way to assess the damage until it dried.

Finally, reluctantly, I studied myself in the mirror. Recalled Mike’s face, Becky’s fat little baby face. I had a despairing intuition that my old man had been telling the truth.

How long had he known?

The bathroom counter and sink were streaked with blood, crimson marbling the Harvest Gold tiles and the white of the porcelain. Fuck him, he could clean it up himself.

After I pulled on jeans and a tee-shirt I grabbed a book and sat out on the front steps. Up and down the block the first cars were arriving home from work. It felt good to be outside of the goddamn single-family stucco jail; plus, I didn’t want to be trapped in there if he decided to ditch work and come back for round two.

## A MAP OF THE EDGE

I looked down the street to the end of our block of little cottages, to where the orange groves started up, and I had a vision of myself as from above, there on the front steps, surrounded by a sea of oranges.



Redlands, I'm told, was once a piece of paradise. The Redlands Colony was founded by eastern real estate developers in the 1890s, and promoted as God's country, a place in the sun where gentleman farmers could buy a hundred acres, hire an overseer, and devote their days to the arts and literature.

The setting was spectacular. Sixty miles inland from the farming communities of Los Angeles, Redlands sat on a high, red-dirt plateau. The San Bernardino Mountains soared up in a giant ridge to the north, ten to eleven thousand feet high, and then, by some freak of geology, wrapped themselves southward to form embracing arms. Clear, clean air—from the mountains you could see Catalina—and three-hundred-forty days of sunshine a year.

Cinderella in sackcloth, waiting for the night of the ball.

The fairy godmother was oranges.

Hard now to understand that oranges in America once bespoke luxury and wealth. Today every Safeway or Kroger has a bin heaped high with them, any time of year. Oranges are sold by the pound and the bag, marketed like potatoes.

Once an orange was something you got at Christmas if you'd been very, very good.

Each of the groves had its gingerbread Victorian mansion, the curlicued porches open to the breeze like astonished mouths, shocked to find themselves flanked by palms.

By the time I was born, in the 1950s, Redlands had passed through the Norma Jean phase, had exhausted the Marilyn period, and was strictly Sunset Boulevard: faded beauty with delusions of grandeur. Stately Victorians stood here and there, but my side of town was filled with squat bungalows and cottages. Our house sat on the last street where all the faces were white. On the next street over, a third of the faces were dark and Hispanic, and by the time you'd moved three

blocks that direction—where most of my friends lived—everyone was “Mexican.” Some of the Hispanic families were pure Spaniards who’d been there since the days of Rancho Lugonia; most of the rest had been in California for generations. As my father pointed out with disdain, many of them *couldn’t even speak Mexican*.

Half of the original groves were gone, but the city was still hemmed in by miles of orange trees, Navels for eating, Valencias for juicing. Unfenced and unguarded—who’d bother to steal oranges?—the groves were where we grew up, where we played army, where we had our first cigarettes, our first booze, our first everything.

A mature orange tree is shaped like an igloo, a dome of glossy green stretched over a hollow. Push through the curtain of leaves and you’re hidden in a private space about eight feet in diameter. Seen from the crow’s nest of one of the windmachines—the tower-mounted propellers that kept frost from settling during the rare winter freeze—the groves were a massive army encampment, rows of shiny tents settled in for a long siege against the mountains.



I needed to talk to someone, but not to any of my friends. In my crowd, part of being a man, which I urgently wanted to be, meant playing tough about things connected to your parents. If your dad beat the hell out of you, it was okay to explain the bruises, dismissively; but it wasn’t okay to let your friends know that your parents had made you change your hair or your dress or your behavior, and the worst thing of all was to let on that your parents had made you cry.

Growing up, Ronny Turner next door had been one of my best friends. We’d gone in different directions, the way kids do around puberty, but Mrs. Turner still liked me. After Mom left, Mrs. Turner made a point of talking to me whenever she got the chance, listening patiently to my invective about Dad.

Halfway across the Turners’ lawn I hesitated, remembering Amanda. Amanda Turner was seventeen, one of my hopeless wet dreams, utterly beyond reach. But even if I knew there was no chance,



not in this lifetime, I wasn't sure I was willing to let her see me like this, red-eyed from crying and with a spazzy gap in my hair.

The need for sympathy won out. I knocked on the door. Nothing. I rang the doorbell, waited, then hammered with my fist. In the backyard their terrier, Rookie, started up a ruckus, but no sounds came from inside.

I scuffed my way back to our steps, sat down, and opened up the copy of *No Exit* I'd left there. Maybe because it was a play rather than a novel I couldn't get lost in it.



It was time for a little artificial courage. I had a good private supply of booze. When Dad got home from the bars around 3 a.m., he'd pull out a bottle and keep drinking. Whether he managed to stumble off to bed or simply passed out on the couch made no difference—he'd never remember how much of the bottle was left when he stopped for the night. I was free to drain off the bulk of what remained, sometimes adding back a little water to disguise the extent of my thievery. In the crawlspace beneath the house I assembled a pretty respectable liquor cabinet.

Screw him, though. I went back into our house, opened one of Dad's bottles of Jim Beam straight out of the freezer, and poured myself an ultra-strong whiskey and Coke in a massive souvenir beer stein. I left the bottle on the kitchen counter, uncapped, and went back out to the front steps.

A third of the way through the drink, I finally assimilated what had just happened. For four years I'd been asking why Mom left me behind. Well, now I knew: because, unlike my siblings, I was my father's child. I almost laughed. The way I felt about him, how could I blame her? I'd leave me too.

Even if I found her, she probably wouldn't want me. It didn't matter. I'd just split—run away to the Bay Area, or a commune in Oregon. I was tall for my age, and most people thought I was older than fifteen...

Up the street, a real motorhead car came around the corner, a blue Duster with red racing stripes, the rear jacked up like a stinkbug's butt over double-wide smoothie tires. The *Sgt. Pepper's* part of me grimaced as it *blum-blummed* its way in my direction, but the street-punk part of me stirred with envy.

It stopped in the middle of the street in front of the Turners' place. I recognized the driver, Jeff Halloran, the older brother of my childhood pal Steve. His hands were wrapped around one of those tiny rubberized steering wheels the drag-racers all used. His knuckles clenched tight as he said something to a passenger hidden behind the glare on the windshield.

The passenger door burst open, and Stacy Slater rolled out of the car and snatched her purse off the seat. "*Don't, and won't!*" she said, and slammed the door. She stomped around the front of the car and over toward the Turners' yard, her miniskirted legs wobbly on high platform shoes. Before she got to the curb, she changed her mind, walked back, and, with great deliberation, kicked the car. She paused for effect, hands on hips, and then headed back toward the sidewalk.

The driver's-side door flung wide and Jeff jumped out. "Hey!" he said. He stood there, scanning the sides of his car for any damage, and then carefully shut the door partway so he could check it, too. Once he'd decided the car was okay—cork soles on the platforms, I suppose—he spoke to Stacy's receding form. "*Stace...*" His voice was surprisingly whiny for a well-known tough.

She was already on the Turners' porch, and answered with an upraised middle finger, not bothering to look back.

Jeff looked from her to his car and back to her, and then gave me a classic *what-the-fuck-you-looking-at* glare until I dropped my gaze. He got back in, revved the engine to wailing-high RPMs, the whole car trembling with aborted forward motion, and then squealed off, leaving rubber on the street and burnt tire drifting in the air.

Far down the block I heard an angry resident yell as the car sped by, and then a faint screech of tires as it rounded a distant corner.

Stacy banged on the Turners' door once more, and then came down their steps holding her bag of a purse by its throat, the shoulder strap dangling near the ground.

I knew Stacy well, though I doubted she knew me. Too old for me, seventeen, gorgeous in a way that hurt, a Size 5 body in a Size 4 epidermis, so that she seemed ready to split right out of her skin. Long, straight black hair down to her butt, too much Swinging London makeup, and the trendiest of trendy clothes.

"They're not home," I called to her, though one might suspect she had already worked this out.

She looked over, noticing me for the first time. "Huh?" she asked, squinting.

"They're gone. I was over there before."

She walked across their lawn. "You know where Amanda is?" she asked from our driveway.

"Nah. I was looking for them all maybe twenty minutes ago." Well, I was looking for *Mom* Turner, but I wasn't under oath.

She came over to the steps. Her mascara had smeared into dark downpointing arrowheads, broken into little channels where the tears had run heaviest. "Do I know you?"

"Umm...maybe."

"Sure. You're that kid that used to hang out with Stevie... Dick Leibnitz, right?"

"Rick." I held up the beer stein. "Want a drink?"

"Yeah, that's right, *Rick*." She reached for the mug, took a swallow, and then blinked as the alcohol content announced itself. "Whoa." She sat down on my right and waggled her hips back, trying to tug down her skirt without using her hands. She dropped her purse and finished the job with her free hand, just covering the crotch of her daiquiri-ice panties. She took another drink, this one a long gulp. "You got bigger."

"Yeah."

"You hang out with Stevie anymore?"

"Not really."

"Good. He's a shit. And his big brother is an even bigger shit."

I listened as she listed Jeff's deep faults and character flaws, nodded thoughtfully in the right places while I studied her smooth legs, made sympathetic sounds when she told me how evil, how Machiavellian Jeff could be, and, whenever she paused in her tirade, passed her the whiskey and Coke for another drink. When I could, in moments when

I was brave enough, I stole glances at her face. Her ruined mascara was endearing, a point of vulnerability that made it seem like we might be from the same planet.

I touched the left side of my head. Now that my hair was dry, it seemed to cover the Band-Aid. We were nearing the bottom of the stein when she said, "You're nice. You're not like other boys, you actually *listen*... Hey, you wanta smoke a joint?"

I'd been feeling pretty proud just to be sitting next to her. Having her ask if I'd get loaded with her left me speechless.

Misunderstanding my silence, she said, "It's not just some ditchweed horseshit, I mean, it's really far out. Been soaked in hashoil."

"Sure. I mean, yeah, great."

She tilted her head back at the door to the house. "Inside?" My eyes widened, and she said, "Out back?"

I sighed. "Maybe. But my dad is Narc of the Century. If he came home..."

"I'm hep. You gotta car?"

I shook my head, trying to be cool despite the fact that, in SoCal terms, she'd just asked, *You gotta penis?* and forced me to admit, *Nope, ain't got one.*

"Huh." She tilted her head toward the end of the street, and I reflected on how sophisticated it was to gesture with an inflection of the head, as if you couldn't be bothered to lift an arm. "Grove, then." She paused. "You got a bottle of Coke or something?" I nodded. "Bring it along."

Halfway up the block she paused and clung to my arm for balance while she pulled off her shoes. She stuffed them into her big shoulderbag, then rolled the bottoms of her feet on the sidewalk and sighed with pleasure. "Fucking giant shoes," she said. "We only wear them for you, you know."

"For me?" I asked. "But I don't care."

"I meant *guys*," she said, and pushed my shoulder for emphasis. "I didn't mean *you*."

I wasn't sure how to take that, but I wanted it to be a compliment, so I decided it was.

## A MAP OF THE EDGE

Whatever she might think, boys in general didn't care about fashion and would just as soon that girls went naked 'round the clock. X-ray vision, totally wasted on that twit Clark Kent, must be the commonest adolescent male fantasy; well, that, and being the last guy on earth following some vague cataclysm that thankfully spared certain girls. But when I thought about it, I was pretty sure Stacy didn't need to hear any of this.

After we crossed Judson Street and entered the grove she stopped to wiggle her toes in the crumbly red dirt, and then plowed ahead like a real Redlands Girl.

The blossoms had long since fallen and the year's oranges were still green baseballs on the trees, but the scent of citrus was strong in the air. Stacy reached back for my hand and led me on through a half-dozen rows until she spotted a tree she liked.

She parted the branches and, ducking her head, led me inside.

It must have been nearing six o'clock—still sunset outside, but dim and shadowed beneath the dome of the tree. Hard dried leaves crackled underfoot, releasing pungent oils that rose up to tickle our nostrils.

"Shit," she said, "how'm I going to sit down on this stuff in a miniskirt?" She giggled. "Haven't done this in a while."

I pulled my tee-shirt over my head and spread it on the ground. "Here."

I sensed her gaze on my face, but my eyes still hadn't adjusted so her expression was lost in the darkness. She sat down on the shirt, then grasped my hand and pulled me down beside her. "See?" She patted the shirt beneath her. "You *aren't* like other boys, are you?"

I felt exposed, my torso naked to the evening. My skin anticipated insects crawling across it, but I forgot about all that after she torched up the first joint.

The brightness of the lighter flame burned itself into my retinas, and smaller versions of its sunburst continued to crawl across my vision as we smoked, appearing on the right and drifting to the far left where they dashed around the back of my skull to enter from the right again, like actors in some slapstick play.

We didn't talk much at first, and by the end of the second joint I was so stoned I wasn't even sure I could. Marijuana for me is usually soporific, but this stuff was psychedelic. Psychedelic and aphrodisiac, as if I needed one; my hard cock was painfully tangled in my underwear, but I didn't dare try to adjust myself.

Stacy could still talk, though, and did, and the tones of her voice from the shadows beside me were like fingers stroking up and down my spine. She talked about Jeff and about other guys she had known and about how nobody cared about her, not really about *her*, and...

My mind drifted, and then I heard her saying, "But, I liked it, riding around in a car that everybody looked at, and now what am I going to do?—I mean, girls who get their own cars and cherry them out, that's so *pathetic*, and..."

She trailed off and stopped. "God," she said, "listen to me. You must think *I'm* pathetic. Cars. What kind of *car* my boyfriend drives. What kind of fucking car *I* drive."

I heard her breathing shorten and I bit my lip. I'd been so happy, just listening to her go on and on, and now because of something I'd failed to say, God knows what, she was going off the rails.

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice catching a little. "Fuck, you sit here and listen to me and all this shit, you must think I'm so fucking *shallow*, I *am* so fucking shallow, my *life* is so fucking shallow, and..."

No, I wanted to say, being with you is like a walk in Eden, but instead I reached for her in the darkness and wrapped my arms around her shoulders and she crumpled up beside me and she was crying, and something cut loose inside me, my happiness since she'd sat down beside me and my sadness at the fact that it couldn't last, that everything about my life was shit except for this single moment, that this afternoon was all I could really ever hope for, and I felt tears running down my cheeks and I turned away so she wouldn't know and tried to keep my breathing steady but kept my arms around her as she sobbed.

And at last she sat up a little and I felt her fingers on my jaw. I rolled my head farther away but her hand touched my cheek, and, astonished, she whispered, "*You're crying too.*"

I started to deny it, but she used that same hand to pivot my face toward her and then pulled my head down to her hers and kissed me, hard and open-mouthed.

There's a tropical fish I'd seen in *National Geographic* where the female is this big solid animal and the male is this tiny little thing that rides along, clasped onto her, a diminutive passenger. Even though I was bigger than Stacy, that's how she made me feel: she was the center of gravity, and I was plunging toward her, a meteor streaking to destruction across her vast sky.

Annihilation. Did I care?

Nope.

I was stuck there in that kiss as if I had sprouted from her mouth until we fell back onto our sides and she made me move my hand—the one that wasn't pinned beneath her—by guiding it down and clamping it onto the swell of her hip.

After that, I needed no encouragement. I fought to work my fingers up under the rear of her miniskirt, realized at last that it was too tight, and worked the skirt up instead, crumpling it until I could get a good handful of pantied flesh.

Stacy kept her tongue battling against mine, battling and winning, and I'm not sure I would have been able to breathe if she hadn't sometimes exhaled into my mouth, erotic artificial respiration. Her hand slid down my naked belly to my waistband, and she fumbled open the buttons and pushed my pants and underwear down as well as she could.

Her hand groped at my cock and I moaned but realized I wasn't hard anymore.

She pulled her mouth away from mine. "Wow," she said. She lifted her hand away and massaged her fingers back and forth across her thumb, assessing the same sticky stuff that I now felt chilling on my crotch. "When did that happen?"

"When we were kissing, I guess."

"You popped your rocks from *kissing* me?"

"Well...yeah."

"Whoa." She stood up into a crouch under the limbs of the tree, unzipped her skirt, and peeled it and her panties off together. "Then getting you up again should be easy, huh?" She pulled her blouse off, and, with charming awkwardness, struggled her way out of her bra.

I sat up but she pushed me down onto my back with a little shove, and I felt the sharp edges of citrus leaves, like a bed of nails for apprentices. She stood with her legs astride me and said, "Lift up." I lifted my hips, and she pulled my pants and underwear down onto my calves. I let myself down, the leaves poking the length of my body, but she ordered, "Again." When I arched up she positioned my tee-shirt underneath me, and I thought she was being considerate of my naked butt until she knelt down straddling me and I realized her knees were on the fabric to either side of my pelvis.

"Here," she said, "do this for a second...and then we'll take care of you." She pulled my hands up to her breasts and held them there, sitting down on me.

I'd felt breasts before, seven of them, to be precise: Brenda (two), Julie (two), Emma (two), and Carolyn (only the left one, and that only very briefly, the bitch). But numbers eight and nine, beneath my palms just then, made me marvel at mammary diversity: Stacy's were smallish and tight, with hard little raspberries as nipples. Smallish, tight, and so very Stacy.

I felt the heat of her straddling my crotch, and between that and my hands on her breasts I had wood in seconds—not just wood but serious wood: oak, teak, ironwood.

She reached down with her hand and squeezed. "Guess we won't need to take care of you, then."

I was a little disappointed not to be *taken care of*, which sounded promising, but when she fitted me to her and worked herself down onto me, any regrets fled far away.

I don't know how long it took—probably not as long as I remember, and certainly not as long as I wanted—but at one point she sat down hard, laid her chest against mine, and whispered, "Are you getting ready to come?" It had the slightest hint of accusation.

"Maybe..." I admitted.

"Well don't," she said. "Help me first." She rolled a shoulder up against my chin. "Very gentle, just bite me."

I nibbled at her skin, and she said, "No, here." She used her hands to move my face so that my lips touched between her shoulder and her neck, at the muscle or tendon or whatever the hell it is that connects



the two. I bit softly, and she made a vague sound, and I took the round, hard cable that runs across there and clenched it lightly between my teeth and squeezed my teeth so that it popped free and she moaned and bore down on me and said, “Yeah, *there...*”

Cool. Even I could do that.

I did it again, and again, and even though she wasn't moving her hips the shudder ran all the way down and clenched at me.

She breathed into my ear, “Keep that up, just that, and I'll let you do *anything.*”

Anything I wanted, anything I knew about, we were already doing, so I went back to nibbling her shoulder tendon, and she went back to riding me, and she gasped each time her tendon popped from between my teeth, and I was wondering if I should switch to the other shoulder when finally she sat up, leveraged herself down on me hard, grinding, and my consciousness disappeared into a very small, slick portion of the world.

I came, but I was so excited that it hurt more than it felt good; the physical effect wasn't that different from getting kneed in the balls, leaving me cramped and gasping. But my spirit was so radiant that for a moment I thought I might be glowing.

I'm the only guy I know who lost his virginity on his back, though maybe the others aren't telling.

For the record, I've tried that neck-tendon thing on other women since, and the results have ranged from puzzlement to aggravation.

She kissed me and then lay there on top of me, and I only went half-soft inside her, even though we stayed like that forever. Maybe she even went to sleep. That would have been fine: I'd live under that tree with her, fasting until the green oranges ripened enough to eat.

Eventually she roused herself and kissed me again, to cover that moment where she lifted her hips and I slid out of her. She pressed her palms on my chest to help push herself up onto shaky legs. She bent over and rummaged through her purse until she produced the bottle of Coke we'd brought, and popped the cap with an opener on her keyring. Instead of drinking it, she covered the lip with her thumb, shook it hard a dozen times, and then squatted down and eased herself onto her thumb and the neck of the bottle. Even in the dark I saw

her thumb flick out suddenly, and watched the glistening foam erupt through her dark pubic hair.

Then she stood up, knees half-bent and wide, and started dabbing at herself with a napkin, still holding the half-empty bottle in her free hand.

“What...?” I asked.

“No rubber. You don’t want me to get pregnant, do you?”

I watched her clean and wipe herself in the darkness under the tree, a few silver spots of moonlight on her skin, and there wasn’t a graceless thing she could have done.

She held out the bottle. “Drink?” she asked, joking.

“Hell, yes,” I said, and reached for it.



We stumbled out of the grove in the dark, arm in arm, weaving on unsteady legs. It seemed impossible to feel these two things at once—a deep sense of peace coupled with a rising, giddy happiness. My life was set now: I was ready to take a job at the local burger joint and come home every night to Stacy, and, a house, and, well, something.

“You think I’m a slut now?” she asked, quiet, her voice almost bitter.

I tripped, regained my footing. “I don’t—” I stammered. “I just...” I stood still and looked into her eyes. “I think you’re the most wonderful person I’ve ever met.”

She kissed me. Must have been the right answer.

“Let’s not tell anybody about this, though, okay?” she asked.

As we crossed Judson Street, an RPD cruiser pulled away from the curb and then zoomed past us, turning on its lights only after it had gone by.

Stacy’s arm tightened on mine.

We walked a few houses down the sidewalk of my block, and then the sound of a well-tuned engine came from behind, headlights throwing our shadows out in front of us.

“I still have my stash,” Stacy whispered.

“Give it to me,” I said. We walked a few more steps, the car behind us moving at our exact pace. “*Give it to me.*”

## A MAP OF THE EDGE

She reached into her purse and passed me a baggie.

“I’ll come to your house later,” I whispered. I stuffed it into my pocket, walked a little farther, then spun about and ran.

Back to the grove. It took a good half-minute before the patrol car responded, and I heard it reverse into an urgent three-point turn, but by then I was across Judson and leaping for the first furrow of the grove.

Maybe we should have played it cool and just kept walking. Who knows? But in the grove, I was uncatchable, eighty acres of endless green domes to hide beneath.

I hid the stash—probably twenty bucks’ worth, no mean sum—under a pile of leaves at the base of a windmachine, and then kept moving, mainly to waste time. I spent two hours making sure the heat was off—walking the perimeter of the grove a few rows in, loping out occasionally to peer down the streets. No patrol cars; just the usual light evening traffic, with the occasional low-rider blasting Hendrix into the warm night. When I felt sure they’d written me off, I went back for her baggie. I sauntered out of the grove a quarter-mile east of where I’d entered, and crossed Colton Avenue into a tract of new houses. A hundred acres of oranges had been torn out to make way for them. The lawns were still being seeded and the hiss of sprinklers filled the dark.

It was maybe a mile to Stacy’s house—everybody knew where the Slaters lived. I was convinced that she’d be waiting there for me, to thank me for saving her from a bust, and bringing back her stash. I was pretty sure she loved me already, but this would seal it.

When the prowler car came by the first time, I kept to my nonchalant stroll, but the car circled back. I heard the whine of a power window lowering; a flashlight blinded me.

I ran. Into somebody’s backyard, trying to toss her stash onto the roof but without time to see where it landed...

Once they had me cuffed in the backseat, they retraced my steps and found the baggie.

I said my people were all runners.

I never said we were good at it.

**David T. Isaak (1954-2021)** was an American author of both fiction and nonfiction.

Dr. Isaak held a BA in Physics and MA and PhD degrees in resource systems. His professional work spanned the globe, taking him to over forty countries. He co-authored three technical, nonfiction books on oil and international politics, and wrote numerous papers, monographs, and multivalent studies.

David had an eclectic life. His first major in college was music, and he played piano and flute. He was a certified Bikram yoga instructor, an accomplished vegetarian cook, a creative mixologist, and an avid reader of fiction and nonfiction alike. He was driven by great characters and story, original voices, and especially by his love of the craft of writing, all of which are reflected in his own writing.

David passed away in April 2021. The five novels he left behind are as diverse as his life. These novels form *The Isaak Collection*.

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