

# Final Thoughts

ONE ARTIST'S TAKE ON THE WAYS IN WHICH WE SEEK – AND FIND – BEAUTY IN THE DESERT.

Words by TOD GOLDBERG

It's 1980 and I'm 9 years old, walking down Palm Canyon at dusk with my grandfather. He'll only live another five years. A heart attack will kill him – his fourth, or maybe his third, since I'm not sure if the story of him having a heart attack while catching a marlin is actually true – so this is borrowed time, which is probably why he's smoking a cigar. "Don't tell your nana," he says, lighting up.

It's fall and everything is reddish-gold: gaudy baubles in their jewelry store display cases. Brake lights from cruising Cadillacs refracting out from store windows, painting the sidewalk brilliant. Even Morrie Geyer – proprietor of Morrie Geyer Menswear, standing outside his shop in a scalloped shirt opened halfway to his belly-button, his tan chest exposed – seems to glow. Or maybe that's the life-sized mannequin of Morrie. It's hard to remember the difference all these years later. You ever saw a person standing next to a mannequin of themselves, well, it distorts reality.

"Have you heard from your dad?" my grandfather asks. I tell him I haven't. He takes a puff from his cigar, let's it go from his mouth. "When was the last time?"

"I don't know," I say. "My birthday?"

We linger in front of See's Candies, across the street from Bullock's. The sweet smell of chocolate and confection rises around us, but then it's been like that the entire time we've been walking, Palm Canyon seemingly filled with candy stores, men in the front windows spreading out fudge, their aprons smeared. Teenage girls stepping out to give you a sample, and it's like magic, candy from nowhere, and free.

"Well," my grandfather says, "I'm right here. If you want to talk about something, just talk about it with me." He gazes down, forces a smile, which makes him look like my mom. They have the same lips. This morning they got into a screaming fight, she stormed out of the condo, spent the day by the pool, smoking, my grandfather's last words hanging between them: *If I gave you*

*a dime, you'd spend a dollar.* "You understand? Man-to-man, Man." A pause, the street moving fast around us now, lights, snippets of conversations, the roar of a muscle car, a breeze that feels like winter ... or maybe none of these things, just a boy and an old man on the street. "We should get some lollipops," he says, and we go into the store. "Get whatever you want and whatever your sister would want. Buy the whole store if you want."

★

Here's the thing about beauty: It doesn't need to be physical. It doesn't even need to be emotional. It can be a moment of simple kindness that you forget about entirely, until one day you're stopped on Palm Canyon, a street you hardly drive down anymore, because you live across town.

You know how that goes.

You hardly get west of Bob Hope during season.

You look at the people crowding the sidewalk, something to watch while you wait for the light to change. To get on with your life. Get off this street. All this traffic. All these tourists. But then you see a boy in front of See's and you remember yourself, standing right there, so long ago that you're closer in age today to your grandfather than your childhood self. And it's all you can do not to run out into the street to find your grandfather, too. To tell him you heard him, that you still hear him, on beautiful fall days,

at dusk, in the smoke of a stranger's cigar, always when you least expect it, like driving through the city of your past or waiting for some distant golden future. 🍃



NICOLE FAY VAISMAN

Tod Goldberg is the New York Times best-selling author of more than a dozen books, including the novels "The House of Secrets," which he co-authored with New York Times best-selling author Brad Meltzer and "Gangsterland," a Hammett Prize finalist. His essays, journalism and criticism have appeared in numerous publications, including the Los Angeles Times, Los Angeles Review of Books and the Wall Street Journal, among others, and he currently directs the Low Residency MFA Program in Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts at the University of California, Riverside.