

How Will The Pilgrims Survive?

by Tod Goldberg

From THE RATTLING WALL #1

The drive from Palm Springs to the Woods Detention Center just south of Castaic usually takes Tania a bit over three hours, mostly because she refuses to speed. She was always eager to see Don, her husband of less than one year, but there was something about breaking the law to see her incarcerated husband that didn't seem logical. Of all the choices she was forced to make in her life, Tania figured putting her car on cruise control three miles beneath the speed limit was the easiest to make. And besides, it was one less thing to concentrate on while driving, which was good since Tania liked to listen to audio books on her drive. Fifty years she'd been alive but it was only in the last three that she'd found the comfort of literature, though she understood that her predilection towards spy novels wasn't exactly the sort of literature that made people feel intellectually invigorated. Not that Tania cared, really, but it occurred to her a few weeks ago that if she really wanted to get some value from her weekly drives to see Don, she'd be wise to pick up some nonfiction titles, too; see if she just might learn something to tell Don about during those invariable moments when conversation halted and both of them realized how little they really knew about each other.

So today, on a Saturday in June, Tania listens to a book about the Pilgrims' first winter. When she took it out from the library, the librarian said, "You understand that this is 18 CDs, right?"

“No,” Tania said. “Is that a problem?”

The librarian, a woman named Crystal that Tania sometimes saw playing slots at the Indian casino where she cocktailed, but who never seemed to recognize Tania in either place, shrugged. “It’s just that you might not finish it in time.”

“For what?”

“The due date,” the librarian said.

“I already know how it ends,” Tania said, but she checked out the actual book, too, so that she could read it if she started to fall behind.

Now, though, as she winds up the last miles of I-5 toward the prison, Tania has begun to wonder if she really does know how it all ends. She’s only three CDs in and everything seems insurmountable. The cold. The disease. And worst of all, the fear. Cold and disease were knowns; it was the unknown that trapped the Pilgrims. In the three hours she’s driven from the low desert, through the Inland Empire, the San Fernando Valley and now up into the Santa Clarita Valley, the Pilgrims have crossed the Atlantic and found themselves in an alien land that seems intent on ruining them. How much more could they possibly take?

Tania passes the exit for Magic Mountain, an amusement park she’s never visited and hadn’t even heard of before moving to California five years ago. That it’s only a mile from one of the state’s largest prisons is surely an unplanned irony, but even still Don has told her that at night you can hear kids screaming on the roller coasters and every now and then the wind picks up the scent of churros and hot dogs and cotton candy so that there are days when he’s on the yard that he can actually smell what life used to be.

It saddens Tania to hear Don talk like that, not because she feels he's been wrongly imprisoned, because she doesn't, but because she doesn't believe Don's life ever consisted of those things. It's just another tiny lie, one of thousands he's told in his life, and if she really wanted to know the truth of it, if he'd ever tasted a churro, ever rode a roller coaster, she could certainly ask him. Avoidance, she's learned, is not something Don is good at, and with thirty years to think about what that means, he's proved to be especially forthcoming when pressed. The use of lying now is moot. It's easier for Tania not to ask. It's easier to have that connection, even if it's false.

The exit for Woods comes up quickly on the right. The sign says it's a mile off, but Tania is sure it's much less than that; she always means to set her odometer to find out exactly, but is usually so flustered in her attempt not to miss her turn off that she forgets, but today she's too busy listening to an excerpt from one of William Bradford's journals and has to slide across three lanes of traffic at the last moment, a trail of honking horns at her back.

When she was learning to drive, Tania's father told her never to honk her horn on the freeway unless she absolutely had to warn someone that they were about to hit her. Honking your horn just to let someone know you thought they had bad manners was useless, her father told her, and it might lead someone else to slam on their brakes or swerve and that could cause an actual accident. "Better to just let stupid people be stupid and maybe they'll kill each other off," he told her.

It was funny how often her father would creep up on her these days. He lived in the Robeson Home now, an assisted living facility in Spokane, and had since her mother died two years ago. Tania last saw him at Christmastime. Her sister Justine offered to buy

her a ticket and to pay for a hotel and everything (“We’ll have a sister’s weekend,” Justine said, as if they’d had such things when they really were sisters, back when they were kids) and though at first Tania felt like she should be offended by this, she accepted. Her sister was a good person. She knew that. Married for twenty-five years, two children who were now almost adults, a home in Walnut Creek with a long driveway, a birch tree in the front yard and, Tania finally understood, regrets of her own, even if Tania didn’t know what those regrets were.

All these years they’d led different lives – Tania a cocktail waitress, first in Reno, then in Las Vegas and finally in Palm Springs; Justine a wife, a mother, and then, when her kids were in middle school, she went and got her law degree, so that now she was also a lawyer, just like her husband Mark – but they came from the same place, the same people, the same genetics. Justine probably thought this trip might get them closer together and maybe it had – they now talked nearly every day – or it could have been from simple necessity: Neither wanted to visit their father alone. Growing up, their father was paranoid and angry, afraid always of what might happen next, his entire life a series of presumptions about what he might do in worse case scenario. Maybe that’s why he, too, always read spy novels, Tania realizes now. The difference, Tania knows, is that not everything is a conspiracy. Some things are just bad.

Since her mother died, Tania had made it a point to call her father at least every couple of weeks. They’d talk for a few minutes about mundane things – she hadn’t even told him about Don, figuring that it wasn’t information he needed to have – and then she’d hang up feeling like she’d done what was right. She loved her father, had loved her mother, too, and knew that both had spent the better part of their lives worried about her.

It was a shapeless truth that only seemed to find its way to Tania after Natalya, the child Tania adopted from Russia thirteen years ago, had disappeared in 2002. Disappeared wasn't really the right explanation for those events; Natalya had run away, probably back to Russia, though Tania has never learned definitively if that was the case. Gone was gone, eventually, and it was only then that Tania began to understand the responsibility that existed between parents and children, the unspoken contract that they'd be *there*, even when they were dead. Her mother was gone now, but she was still alive in memory, still a temporal truth, just as her father was, sitting in an assisted living facility but for the most part an inactive concern. He'd been her father and now he was this man in Spokane who sounded like her father on the phone but who didn't have any real responsibility to her anymore.

But when Tania saw her father at the Robeson Home she was struck immediately by how happy he seemed. He greeted Tania and her sister in the foyer to the home dressed in a red V-neck sweater, tan pants and smart looking loafers, as if he was just back from the country club and not spending his days in a facility meant to hide the dead end at the bottom of the road. He proudly took Tania and Justine around the facility to meet his friends, the facility's administrators, the cooks, even the Mexican girl who came in and took out his trash everyday. "We all just love having Stu around here," one of the cooks said. "Your father makes everyone feel good."

That afternoon they went to the Sizzler for lunch and Justine spent most of the meal talking about her kids, which was fine. Tania was truly interested in them, had become a doting long-distance aunt in the absence of her own adopted daughter, and even considered inviting them down to Palm Springs for spring break, but never had.

“Do you remember how we used to come here with your mother?” Stu said after a while. He’d been listening intently to Justine, but Tania could tell something was bothering him and had been since the cook had told them how well-liked he was. “It wasn’t a Sizzler then, was it?”

“No,” Tania said. “It was a Sambo’s.”

“Right, right,” Stu said. He’d worked his entire adult life in the restaurant supply business and when Tania was a kid he generally refused to dine out; the mere sight of a ramekin enough sometimes to throw him into a rage about some perceived workplace injustice. “She used to love their pancakes, didn’t she?”

“I don’t remember,” Justine said.

“How can you not remember?” Stu said. He was suddenly so surprised, so animated, that Tania found herself shrinking in her seat, like she had as a child when he’d make some announcement about, say, the likelihood that the Russians would nuke them all to death sometime in the next decade. It wasn’t fear she felt sitting across from him at the Sizzler, not like when she was a kid, but rather it was a feeling closer to shame. She’d forgotten, too, or maybe she never knew, what foods her mother liked. It seemed a silly thing to commit to memory in the space of an entire life, but at that moment it filled her with an uncommon sadness: How could she not know what made her mother happy?

“It’s so long ago,” Justine said. “I guess I’ve replaced it with other things.”

Stu nodded once, as if Justine had confirmed something important to him, and his energy seemed to wane. “I don’t ask this to be sappy,” he said, “and I don’t ask this because I feel like I’m going to die tomorrow or something – because I want you both to

know I feel good these days, I really do – but I guess I just need to know if you think I was a good father to you.”

“Of course,” Justine said immediately, but Tania didn’t say a word because she didn’t really know and figured she wouldn’t know until he, like her mother, was gone.

“Tania?” he said. There was a queer half smile on his face that Tania remembered from her childhood.

“What does *good* mean?” Tania said. “You were our father. I think that was enough.”

“I don’t think I was, particularly,” he said. “And that’s okay. I want you to know that I think it’s okay; that’s important to me. I’m not angry about it anymore, because for a long time I was, you know. Even while it was happening. Your mother ever tell you I went on vacations by myself?”

“No,” Tania said, though it made sense to her in retrospect.

“It was wrong of me,” he said.

“What exactly are you confessing to?” Justine said.

“Nothing,” he said. “I want you to have the freedom to not remember me well. To not feel guilt about it. That’s all.”

“This is a pointless exercise, dad,” Justine said. “Can’t we just have a nice lunch?”

“I was scared of you,” Tania said to her father. “But I’m not anymore.”

“I’m happy to hear that, Tania,” he said.

“Only took me fifty years,” she said.

There are always barefoot women walking up the steep road leading up to the prison and today was no different. The closest bus stop is half-a-mile from the front gates of the facility, across the street from Castle Rock Elementary and adjacent to a mini-mall with a Quizno's and a Cold Stone Creamery and a check cashing place. Tania figures this must be a security precaution, can't have some runaway inmate able to hop on a city bus right at the front gates of the prison; so there were always these women in tight dresses and mini-skirts taking off their spiked heels and walking barefoot or, occasionally, in house slippers up to where the road levels off about two hundred yards from the gate.

Used to be Tania would stop and pick up a couple girls on her way up, but she doesn't bother anymore. Tania simply can't stand to hear their stories. Their men were always innocent. Their men were done in by bad cops or snitches or the system, whatever that meant. No one ever guilty of anything.

At the flashing red light midway up the road – at the intersection that leads off to the Jay-Reigh Honor Rancho, a dairy farm operated by the minimum security inmates – Tania spots a familiar face standing silently at the cross-walk in a leopard print mini-skirt. She can't remember her name – Carol? Or maybe it was Susan? – only that her husband is a rapist. Tania had given her a ride once and then spent the better part of an afternoon processing through the visitation sections with her, sharing small talk about the weather, the smell of the prison, about how so many of the other women were just girls, really, just kids and what a shame that was.

Tania had liked her well enough – they were both about the same age – until she'd gotten around to asking what her husband was in for. “Oh,” Carol-or-Susan said, “he's in

for rape. But it's not like he's a rapist. It's not like that. It's not like he was out in a park waiting for some girl."

"What's it like then?" Tania asked.

"He drove a truck, you know, so I knew what that life was like and I understood that sometimes, you know, he might get a girl. Anyway, he picked one up in Kings City and I guess they got high or whatever," she said. She waved her hand dismissively, as if it was just one of those things that happens all the time in the course of a marriage. "I guess you could say he touched a woman in a way that was inappropriate. It all got blown out of proportion. And here we are."

"Do you even hear yourself?" Tania said.

"My husband is a good man," she said. "Just like your husband is, I'm sure."

"I don't have that pretension," Tania said.

"Then what are you doing here?"

It was a question Tania had asked herself at so many different points in her life that when this woman, this walking lie, posed it to her she actually began to laugh. Who the hell knew? She'd worked her entire life bringing people drinks and along the way had adopted a child who ran away from her, and here she was, going to visit her incarcerated husband. A man she'd only kissed once, on the day of their marriage.

At some point, Tania thinks now as she goes through the stoplight, maybe you stop asking yourself about *what* and *how* and maybe begin focusing on *why*. Maybe that's what she can learn from this book she's listening to. The poor pilgrims dying every day in the shadow of Plymouth Rock, their lives consigned to history, who must have asked themselves that same thing. Every day they got further away from the life they'd known.

Every day they got closer to dying or maybe they got closer to really living, though she didn't suppose the pilgrims were applying that kind of Dr. Phil shit to their lives back then. All that, but at least they had the *why* down.

There's a line up of cars waiting at the front gate of the prison, so Tania slows to a stop about a hundred yards away. Sometimes, if Tania is lucky, the guard will recognize her and will just wave her through, though that's pretty rare. Rules are rules and Tania can respect that. Today, she's about ten cars back, which could mean five minutes or an hour, depending upon who happens to be in the cars. So many of the people coming to visit have priors and they need to be smart about who gets inside the prison, which strikes Tania as funny if only in the barest sense. You spend your free time and social life at a prison and weird things start to strike you as amusing.

At first, she and Don traded letters for the better part of six months after she'd seen a photo of him in another cocktail girl's order book. Tania had cocktailed at the Chuyalla Indian Casino with Kim for the last five years but barely knew her, just as she barely knew anyone she worked with. You work at a casino long enough, you realize everything there is transitive, including interpersonal relationships, and so if you're smart, Tania reasoned, you just came in and did your job and made your friends elsewhere. No sense getting too connected to other people who've made the same mistakes as you.

Kim wasn't even 30 yet, but Tania knew she had a kid, a ten year old boy, who had some developmental problem that the casino's health insurance didn't cover. The health insurance problem was a constant source of Kim's running break room chatter with the other girls. She was always telling them that soon as she got her AA from

College of the Desert, the local junior college, she was going to find a better job at a place that gave a damn about its employees, but in all the years Tania heard this patter she'd never once seen the girl with a textbook. She wondered if Kim even had her GED.

But that afternoon, as they stood next to each other at the bar waiting for their orders to be filled, Tania couldn't help but notice the photo Kim had in her order book. Kim had laminated it, so the photo picked up the lights circling around them, but it was also wider than Kim's book, so the edges of the photo had become jagged and Kim picked absently at the wrinkles of plastic.

"He's handsome," Tania said, though in truth he was just average, the kind of guy you'd look right past on the street and never even begin to imagine what his life might be like, but he had a nice, unconscious smile that appealed to her.

"That's my brother Don," Kim said.

"Oh?" Tania said, because she didn't know the proper response to Kim's answer. After Natalya ran away, she'd learned how hard it was to explain to people things like photos and pillows and what might otherwise be considered silly trinkets. Other people's keepsakes...that was land she didn't cross into. It was usually just easier, and better manners, to say *Oh?*

"He's in prison."

"What did he do?"

"Something went wrong in Kettleman," Kim said with a nervous half-laugh and for the first time in the five years that she'd worked with her, Tania saw something more in the girl than the compendium of complaints she heard her mutter each day. Kim was someone's sister and that someone was in jail. Fair enough.

“Oh,” Tania said.

Gordon, the bartender, put Tania and Kim’s drinks onto their trays and then gave Tania’s wrist a playful pinch. They’d gone out on a date once and though it hadn’t gone well, he still casually flirted with her, though Tania knew he was now sleeping with a Korean black jack dealer named Sang.

“Well, okay, sweetheart,” Tania said. She picked up her tray and examined the drinks against her order. They were all there. “It’s not my business.”

“No, no,” Kim said. She reached out and put her hand on Tania’s arm. “Hold up for a sec.”

Used to be a lot of the girls came to Tania for advice but that time had passed once word got around that Tania had her own problems. Gordon was probably to blame for that, which was okay. He was the only person at the casino she’d told directly about her daughter and though she regretted telling him initially, it had released a burden from her. So even when she heard Kim going on about her health insurance and her kid, she didn’t bother to interject with whatever wisdom she might have. Problems weren’t solved in the break room, they were just examined in minute detail and then left on the floor. So Tania didn’t really know what to expect from Kim.

“We used to say that to each other back when we were kids,” Kim said.

“Kettleman is this place...I think it’s from a Western we saw. I don’t even know anymore. It just meant that a bad thing had happened in the past. You know, some unspeakable horribleness?”

“I do,” Tania said.

“So whenever anyone asks about him, I think about that. This one time he broke the kitchen table – I don’t even remember how, only that one of the legs was totally gone – and so mom comes home and she’s like losing her mind, because we didn’t have a bunch of money and no one expects to have to go out and buy a new kitchen table, right? So he just tells her, totally straight faced, that something went wrong in Kettleman. And you know, what could she say?”

“You just laugh in that case,” Tania said.

“That’s right, that’s right,” Kim said. “I guess I didn’t realize it then, because I was like nine. But I understand now, because what can you do? You can’t unbreak the leg. I mean, that’s what parenting is, isn’t it?”

“Most of the time,” Tania said. “What I recall, anyway.”

“I’m sorry,” Kim said, “I didn’t mean to bring that up. Being a parent and all that.”

“It’s okay,” Tania said. “I had a daughter and now I don’t. I can’t unbreak that leg, either.”

Kim nodded once and then looked over her shoulder, back at the tables filled with gamblers waiting for their drinks. “I should drop these drinks off,” she said.

“What did he do, Kim?”

“Killed someone with his car,” she said.

“Was he drunk?”

“No,” she said, “just stupid. He’s pretty much been a fuck up his entire life.”

“You don’t go from being a fuck up to killing a person,” Tania said.

“Maybe not most people,” Kim said. “I love him, you know? He’s my brother and I love him, but he wasn’t ever a good person until he went to prison. Does that seem stupid to you?”

“He killed someone,” Tania said.

“What kind of lesson is that?”

“None at all.”

Kim nodded again, liked she’d reached a conclusion she hadn’t expected. “I don’t know. Your adopted daughter, she ran away?”

“Yes,” Tania said.

“What did you do to her?”

“Nothing,” Tania said, though that wasn’t true. She’d brought her from Russia to Las Vegas. She’d changed her entire life without ever asking her consent. “She didn’t want to be here. I tried and failed to keep her. If she has a better life now, that makes me happy.”

“Does it really?”

“It has to,” Tania said.

“What I don’t understand,” Kim said, “is how my brother and me, we grow up in the same house, same values, and he’s this one kind of person, this kind of person who hurts people, right? And I’m this entire other kind of person. Maybe you don’t know it, because we aren’t friends or anything, but I’m very caring. I am a very caring person.”

It was Tania’s experience that if you had to tell anyone who you were, had to really convince them of a certain fact, that the opposite of that fact was probably true, but

she didn't feel that way about Kim right then and it surprised her. "I'm sure you are," Tania said.

"You know I got a kid?"

"A boy, right?"

"Right. His name is Darren. But here's the thing. Darren loves his uncle like crazy. They used to roll around like puppies together, just real playful with each other, and now my brother is in prison and I will not take Darren to see him. I told him Don got a job in China. I feel a lot of shame for that."

Kim's eyes welled up and Tania knew that the right thing to do was to set her tray down and hug the girl, take her in her arms and tell her that everything would be okay, that her life didn't need to be paralyzed by the choices she'd made, that her brother had made his own choices and they were the worst possible ones, and that if Kim were smart she'd just excise him from her life and move on, stop looking for other ways her life could be fucked up by other people.

Instead, Tania just stood there and quietly watched Kim collect herself. "I'm sorry," Kim said eventually. "You're just real easy to talk to."

"You don't need to share this stuff with me," Tania said.

"I don't need not to, either," Kim said.

"I guess what I meant to say was that you don't owe it to me. You don't have to keep telling me stuff if you don't want to. Either way is fine with me."

"I know that," she said. "I'm a grown woman, Tania."

They were both silent for a moment and Tania reached over and took the photo of Don out of Kim's order book. "You have the same chin as your brother," Tania said.

“Would you like to write him a letter?” Kim said.

“About what?”

“About whatever.”

The waiting area inside Woods isn't the best place to try to read. The fluorescent lights flicker intermittently. There's always someone crying. It smells like a mixture of some knock off of Victoria's Secret body wash, sweat and coffee with a dash of whatever the blue fluid is that the janitors (who are actually Trustees) use to periodically spray down the seats and mop up the floors. But Tania knows that her wait time could be ten minutes or five hours and understands that if she just sits watching FOX News on the lone television suspended from the ceiling that she'll be in no mood to chat with Don. It's not the news itself, but rather it's the realization that dawns on Tania whenever she watches the news that the world is moving way too fast now, that there are so many things happening at once that it's impossible to keep up anymore. *What aren't they reporting? Who is being left behind?* How is she to know what is important and what can be ignored when everything is told in that same voice that says: *The end is coming, there is no chance for anyone, run for the hills, unless they are on fire, in which case stay in your house, unless the flood waters have reached your door.* They should say, *Stay in bed and keep the covers over your head,* and just be done with it.

So instead Tania reads her book about the Pilgrims. It's the first time she's actually *read* the book and the experience is entirely different than hearing it read over her car speakers. There are actual copies of letters and diary entries the real Pilgrims wrote reproduced in the book and Tania finds herself fascinated by their handwriting. It's

nearly impossible to read – their cursive is a thing of art, really; all flowing lines and sharp points and the few words she can decipher are spelled oddly – but what interests Tania is that she can see certain points of pressure in the handwriting, places where the writer pressed harder than usual with their pen and ink pooled, or places where they seemed to pause and the ink dotted out incrementally between words.

But it's the white space that truly captivates her; the spaces in between paragraphs, specifically. Nearly four hundred years later, Tania can see where these people stopped to think. What happened in that white space? How much time elapsed between paragraphs? Was it the next moment or the next morning?

When Tania reads the transcriptions, she sees that some of the letters encapsulated weeks of time, sometimes even months, though she can't be sure if it was a running process or all written at once. Tania wonders if the people writing the letters were anything like her; wonders if they met would they have any common ground. All of this history between them but they were still *people*, that hadn't changed, right?

So many of the letters were about loss and faith and the challenge of existing, what Tania thinks of as just links on a long chain of people losing what they valued and then fighting to make it through to the next day. Maybe that was it. Maybe that was the thing that connected Tania to the Pilgrims and to, say, the girl sitting beside her in the waiting area. The girl was maybe 19. She had a tattoo of a cat's claw on her neck and she wore a plain white top with no bra and kept asking other women to borrow things – a pen, a piece of paper, lipstick – that she then had no real use for, but the asking would get her involved in a conversation for a few minutes, to the point that Tania now knew pretty much all she needed to know about the girl: She was there to visit her boyfriend Andre,

who was doing five for burglary, but she was pretty sure he'd get out early on account of his good behavior, because he was pretty much innocent and thus was trying to keep it real clean in lock-up. She'd asked Tania thirty minutes ago what she was reading about and Tania said, "The pilgrims."

And the girl said, "That come with Columbus?"

And Tania said, "Yes," because she didn't want to have to tell her she was wrong. It just wasn't worth it.

"I learned about that in fourth grade," the girl said. "What I never understood? Why anyone want to come to this busted up place back then?"

"They wanted freedom," Tania said.

"Yeah, that's what they said in fourth grade, but I tell you one thing, nothing free about freezing to death. Them and the Donner party. That's crazy, you ask me. I stay home by the fire and be happy. You got a Kleenex I could borrow?"

The girl was silent now, had been for the last several minutes, but her words still reverberated with Tania. When was the last time Tania had truly been happy? Her wedding day was happy, but it ended so quickly, and then she was back on the freeway headed for the desert and each mile she drove turned the ceremony into a memory that became more diffuse with each passing city. Had she just married prisoner number 1892K075, a man who couldn't possibly love her, a man she couldn't possibly love? There was a bouquet of roses on the passenger seat and a simple silver band on her finger, a stack of paperwork in a manila folder in the backseat which included a receipt for the deposit she'd made into Don's commissary account at the prison – \$300 – so he could treat himself and his boys to some snacks for the next month.

She'd paid nearly \$50,000 to adopt Natalya from Russia all those years ago, Tania recalls. The deflated price of love. Everything is in recession. It took Tania several months to become truly happy about life with Natalya, to learn to actually love her child, and by then she didn't even realize she was happy, she just knew that she'd survived the unknowable process of motherhood and come out the otherside feeling...right. That was all. She felt right. When Natalya left, that feeling went with her. Don had filled up some of that space, if only because she knew he wasn't going anywhere.

"You're Tania Hobbes, right?" the girl beside her says suddenly.

"Yes," she says, though actually she'd never legally changed her last name to her husband's, though she told him she had. "How'd you know that?"

"I remember you from a few weeks back," she says. "You were reading a book about spies, so I bought it when I saw it at the Target."

"Did we talk?"

"No," the girl says, "I just was looking at you and thought you looked pretty put together, so I made a point to remember your name when they called it."

"Did you read the book?"

"Tried to," she said, "but it didn't make any sense. Bunch of people running around talking about conspiracies and shit. And I was like, you kill someone you don't need to have the president behind it to make it dramatic, you know? People getting killed is people getting killed no matter who calls the shot."

"I believe that, too," Tania says and then she tells the girl something she's never told anyone, not her co-workers, but of course they know because of Kim, not even her sister, though her sister could find out easily enough. "My husband killed someone."

“Yeah? How come?”

“I don’t really know,” Tania says.

“You didn’t ask him?”

“No,” Tania says. “It happened before I knew him.”

“You seem like a nice lady,” the girl says, “but you need to dump that man of yours. He makes you guilty by association.”

“What about you? Are you guilty of whatever your boyfriend did?”

“I am,” she says. “And so here I am, just like you, every weekend, doing my time.”

It’s four in the afternoon when Tania finally gets called into see Don, which means she only has thirty minutes to spend with him today instead of the normal hour. She’s led into the visiting area by a female guard named Sherry that she’s met a few times, and who she once saw eating at the Chipotle down the road in Valencia. It was a little bit like being a kid and seeing your kindergarten teacher at Safeway buying groceries. They both nodded at each other but didn’t speak, not that they would have had anything to talk about, really. But since then, Tania always got a nice smile out of Sherry when she saw her and even usually got a few more minutes than was allotted if Sherry was on duty, but it was closing time today, so when Sherry drops her off at cubicle #19, she tells Tania she can only let her stay until the half-hour and Tania thanks her.

“Hey darling,” Don says when Tania picks up the phone on her side of the cubicle. It’s what he says every time she visits and at first Tania thought it was cute, but now she wonders if that’s just what he says to women, if he’s said that to every woman

who's ever been on the other end of a phone line. It's the sort of thinking that can make you crazy, Tania realizes, the sort of thinking that disappears when you love a person, because you can't imagine them ever speaking intimately to anyone other than you.

"How you been?"

"I've missed you," Tania says.

"Me, too," he says. "How was your week?"

"I'm reading this book," she says, "about the Pilgrims."

"Yeah?"

"You wouldn't believe," she says and then stops herself and for a long moment she stares at her husband and tries to imagine what he looked like when he was running that guy down with his car. What was that guy's name? She didn't know. She'd never asked. Never once had she even bothered to look at his court records. What was the use? He was guilty. He'd done it. And yet here she was, a few feet away from him, separated by bullet-proof glass and guards with guns and the excuses they'd both told themselves over the years. So much weight. So much distance. So much time. Don looked interested in whatever she was going to say next, actually compelled, as if what she might tell him could really matter compared to whatever it was he fought with inside his own head. Fifty years had come and gone in Tania's life and to what end? This day? This life? All this time looking for a bit of clarity and it was here, in a prison, all the time. "You wouldn't believe," Tania says again, "what they went through to survive."