

She's Leaving Home by Sarah Sarai

Clover loved knowing car fumes made the late-afternoon sky a yawn of neon pink and fake orange—eerie but pretty. Truth is Beauty is a sunset in L.A. Not for nothing had she read “Ode on a Grecian Urn” in English. Beauty is Truth is pollution. She’d been won over to another destroyer of lungs—cigarettes—before summer vacation when she was studying at Douglas’ and Mr. Hall threw a pack of Marlboros on the kitchen table. “Hello, Clover,” he’d called over his shoulder.

“He’s trying to make me a man.” Douglas had tugged at cellophane on the red box. Mr. Hall could drop ten cartons of smokes on the table and Douglas would still be gay, gay and a man.

Stupid. She was in her parents’ Rambler, driving home from Pickwick Bookstore on Hollywood Boulevard where she’d bought *You Only Live Twice* for her pop’s birthday. They’d been trading James Bond novels for a couple of years. She turned onto Barham Blvd. as the d.j. announced a new song, “Right after some important announcements.” She checked the panel—oil was okay, gas half-full, nothing overheating, then looked to the sunset again. Really nice. Eyes back on the road, she reached into her purse, pushed in the cigarette lighter and when it popped out, introduced smoke to fire to her lungs. Nice.

Silence shook the radio, active silence, pure sound-wave. She felt like a ship in a bottle in the driver’s seat; the air was heated and thick even though all four windows were cranked open—they had to be if she was going to hide the smoke from her mother. Something

was going to happen, but she didn't know what. And then Paul started singing. It was like knowing who was on the phone before you heard their voice.

Wednesday morning at five o'clock.

What? She wasn't sure her heart was still beating. She'd always known something would change her boring life and now here Paul was changing her boring life. She reached the crest of the hill and felt the neon sunset. It was end-of-August warm.

As the day begins.

Was this the most beautiful piece of music she'd ever heard? She wanted to pull over, stop the car, breathe in all the beauty and truth of what she was hearing, but this part of the road didn't have a shoulder. Her skin shimmied, *did* the Shimmy, wobbled like a car shimmy when a screw is loose. She was all flesh and all her flesh was moving and moved by Paul's emphasis of every syllable.

Si-lent-ly clos-ing her bed-room door.

If she got home soon she could sit in the Rambler and drink in the rest, let the engine tick, heave and sigh. By the time her mother ran out in that green print housecoat, waving a pancake turner as if Clover needed to be flipped—it didn't even make sense when what she was trying to wave away was cigarette smoke—the song would be over. Her father would be in the living room, staring at his own brain or reading Sherlock Holmes. Again. Boy did he need a new Ian Fleming.

Once more she thought about racing down the hill but had to brake. A Cadillac big as a hearse was taking up both lanes. Between the fact it was a Caddy and the hand waving out the window for cars to pass was shrunken and feeble, she knew the driver was an old guy. Probably lived in fancy Toluca Lake maybe next door to Bob Hope. Her house was next door to people who lived next door to Toluca Lake. It was on a parking lot. No one ever explained to her how the little house could have been built on a parking lot, at an angle, too, but there it was. The back door opened to a little path that ran between two real houses to a real street. The front door opened to asphalt.

The song was ending, she could tell, but she was able to scoot the Rambler around the old guy in the Cadillac, so maybe. His engine had stopped flooding; engines stalled, flooded or were a piece of crap and it was pretty safe to say the midnight-blue Caddy wasn't a piece of crap. Checking the rear view mirror she wondered if it was possible to go half a mile an hour. The old guy was doing it.

Clover decided her mom was right in telling her that heaven and hell were on earth. No doubt about hell, that was for sure, life was miserable more often than not, even if it wasn't it was. She assumed her life was hell and would continue to be hell until some vague later on, but listening to Paul McCartney sing this song she realized she'd assumed wrong. "I made an ass out of *ume* and *med*." And Paul wasn't even her favorite.

In junior high she pasted report cards and certificates of excellence from the speech and debate club in her scrapbook. The last two years she'd stuck that kind of stuff in the back and glued in *Time* and *Life*

magazine clippings about the Beatles and read the articles over and over. There was a war going on; television news was ugly and confusing. Her father would shout, “Kill them all!” and pour himself a shot. John, Aretha, Otis, Marvin Gaye. The Fifth Dimension! Up up and away. Without them, she didn’t know what she’d do.

Even with the old guy who may have lived next to Bob Hope in Toluca Lake out of her way, traffic wasn’t flowing as smoothly as she’d have liked. Once more, cars slowed. She tapped the brake and checked her rear view mirror. All was okay. Then she felt it all over again, the air in the bottle, her as a tiny frigate in the driver’s seat. Everything warm. Elongated time yawned like the sky, and she knew, just knew, what was about to happen.

Wednesday morning at five o’clock. . .

The d.j. was replaying the song! She wasn’t the only one who knew they were hearing something completely true and beautiful. She was tuned in. Clover was tuned in. She decided to barrel down the hill the rest of the way, swing left at Franklin, glide into the parking lot where her ridiculous stucco house was conveniently stuck.

As the day begins

Clover gulped and pushed down on the gas. Her steering was awkward. She knew she wasn’t a very good driver, just like she wasn’t a very good athlete. In two weeks she’d be a high school senior. She hoped they didn’t make her play tennis or bowl—seen as a senior privilege. That one time she raised an arm to swing the tennis racket she felt a pain in her shoulder. And

bowling, jeeze! The car bumped, jack rabbit. She was going too fast, she knew, and downhill. The car raced on. There was the Smoke House coming up on the left and Warner Brother Studios on the right.

Every time she saw the entrance to the studio she remembered the flowers, hundreds of bouquets from the set of *My Fair Lady* given to the neighborhood by the crew. She'd had flowers in her bedroom which Audrey Hepburn had sung to, or the woman who was doing the singing for Miss Hepburn. Marnie Nixon. Clover was proud of her high movie I.Q. but then everyone in L.A. knew things like that. She lived near people who lived near Toluca Lake.

The car was going fast for a Rambler. Had her father brought it in to get the brake lining fixed? She pushed on the brake. It worked. Paul was singing and she remembered the bright bouquets—she'd owned roses that'd been sung to by Audrey Hepburn, Marnie Nixon and Rex Harrison.

Here was Franklin Avenue! The light was red, no it was green, it just turned green, she was turning left and would turn right to her stupid house like a trailer where she would be able to immerse herself, a tiny ship in a bottle, in the rest of the song.

That was Clover's final memory, so all considered, her's wasn't a terrible death, being both instantaneous and exciting. Her parents didn't know she'd been thinking of fragrant flowers and listening to the Beatles when the Rambler was hit by a drunk driver leaving the Smoke House parking lot. She slammed into a traffic pole, the end.

Or not, because Clover began to have a slew of new impressions. After a confusing time period she later referred to as Orientation, she saw her parents were more distant than usual and sad—needing comfort. Why had she been so mad at them so many times? Well, that question was rhetorical; Clover understood a few things about being a teenager. She saw their mouths move but no sounds came—or nothing she could hear now that she was dead. Her mother cried more than usual, and her father didn't bother to hide his scotch under the sink, but left the bottle on the t.v. until it was empty and then a new bottle replaced it. She could hardly blame him.

He'd lost a car! Clover would have taken up drinking if she'd lost a car, even the stupid four-door red Rambler. All she'd lost was, what was it? Her keys? Oh, duh, her life. Death was no memory enhancer.

At her memorial service she noticed her sisters crying, but not too much. Then her classmates started senior year. It was crazy but Douglas said a few words about her in Homeroom. Did anything in high school make sense, except facts? There had been tons of facts to be learned and, like a volleyball, returned—facts like, Mark Twain's real name was Samuel Clemens; the Civil War was fought to help the economy of the northern states; information about the fruit-basket of civilization (Harry & David), well, the cradle of civilization which was Mesopotamia but she'd written "Harry & David." Mr. Hansen had written, "Huh?" and "Hah hah!" and given her half off on that question.

She didn't know what death meant because here she was and if she was anyplace, how could she be dead? Man oh man, she'd hated Sunday School, and now she didn't have to go, so ha ha Protestantism. Life-

after-death was like that floaty stage of the flu—the good stage, the ginger ale stage. Her little body was cremated and the ashes tossed off the Pacific Ocean.

When leaves on the few trees in Griffith Park turned golden as a sunset, she started thinking about her nephew and niece. And here was the neat part—she thought hard about Tank and about Sasha and there they were, on the sidewalk in front of their house in regular L.A., sort of south and central. Tank had spread out his genius pencil drawings of super heroes and Sasha was sawing wood to build an airplane.

She could think hard about something and then be near it.

Clover started saying encouraging things an aunt should say. Of course they couldn't hear. She'd expected her mother to cry and her father to hit the vodka but Tank and Sasha were seven and ten. Clover decided to spend time with them though knew she'd have to keep reminding herself she was dead so her feelings weren't hurt if they didn't any attention. Some lady from her mother's church, who'd died because a lump in her brain exploded, appeared and talked to her about God's love. Clover ignored her and the lady went somewhere else. Sasha and Tank keep having fun. They were black or mixed. That'd been a thing, a thing, in 1960 but her folks had decided it wasn't a thing. Their father was black all the way and their mother was Clover's sister and white all the way. Tank and Sasha were Tank and Sasha, all the way.

And now there was this really short woman with big bosoms who held out her arms for a hug, but hugs were a thing of the past, like life was now that she was

dead, whatever that meant. The lady with big bosoms explained without opening her mouth that she was her grandmother. Clover remembered when her grandmother died. Her father had taken her to the Natural History Museum at Exposition Park where they'd seen a dead hippopotamus behind glass—and her father had put out his big hand for her littler one to hold onto as if his hand was the horse's reins on the merry-go-round. He wasn't happy but he wasn't always unhappy.

She got in four jumps up-and-down before he glared at her. Pop didn't like kids jumping, clapping or skipping.

They'd walked to a phone booth outside, and he'd opened the door which was glass and like a big accordion. She was able to stand still and not leave his sight because the animals might leap out of the museum. She'd known it was a load of crap, but so what.

Her pop had put the phone back. "Grandma's gone."

"I know she's not here." Her lips'd mashed together. "You mean she went to Carpinteria to the beach?" Her little hand submerged in his again as they walked to the car.

"Don't we feed you enough?" It could have been funny, coming from her father, but when she looked up he was so sad she started crying. So that was when she learned her grandmother died.

So Grandma had died and now here she was, smiling. Clover wouldn't have minded a hug, come to think of it, but liked the light shining through her

grandmother. She tried to ask her grandmother, who was dead, about her grandfather but the question didn't come out at all. She tried to point to the great grandchildren, Sasha and Tank, and felt weird energy doing the pointing for her; her grandmother was hugging but not hugging them, and beaming. She wondered if she and her grandmother had turned-on and dropped out and almost thought about San Francisco but stopped her thoughts because the way things were going since she climbed out of the Rambler, she'd be in San Francisco, like that, and she didn't want to. She wanted to see how Sasha's airplane looked when it was finished and Tank's drawings, to watch all their kid happiness, and she liked being near her smiling grandmother with her big bosoms.

Thinking about hippies reminded her of her sister who lived in the flats of Hollywood with some guy who had long hair that smelled bad. Lana had told her, "You come from a sarcastic family, kid."

Her mother had said, "Well, Clover, you're not happy with the way things are?" as a lead-in to talking about heaven and hell and the making of each and either here on earth. Teachers or not, everyone was teaching.

She tried to teach her grandmother the Shimmy. Her grandma's laugh was the sweet sound of a wind chime. Tank and Sasha were still Tank and Sasha. When they pointed and waved she was happy as Audrey Hepburn's roses. Their father, Pits, had been on the side of the house, smoking something smaller than a cigarette, a joint of course, and now was rolling up the garden hose. Pits didn't mind if kids jumped and skipped. They were waving at an airplane flying to Los Angeles International Airport, Clover realized. She

thought about karma and wondered what kind of karma an airplane had. By the time she reasoned that an airplane's karma was separate from the sum of the passengers' karmas, the plane wasn't around for her niece and nephew to see, but they were still looking up and a small fuzz of psychedelic hope rose in her heart or would have if she'd had one at that point. She realized they were looking at the Goodyear blimp. Maybe there was a game as U.S.C.

Something was off. She concentrated. That was it. Her grandmother wasn't there. Was she in the ground? Who wanted to be in the ground? She wasn't a worm. She worried about Tank and Sasha, and Pits, who had his problems because of that skin thing, and also could be a little mean. At a barbecue in his backyard his friends'd gone on and on about people who were white. It was just her and her brother-in-law and them and she was sure he didn't mind all his friends picking on her and it wasn't because of skin color but because that's who he was.

Now her sister Marsha was unloading bags of groceries from the Buick. She was intense and touchy like Pits, left the room when Ma talked about heaven or hell and laughed at Lana on sarcasm. A mirror image of Pits' discontent. When Pits taped over her Loretta Lynn tapes the dust flew.

Clover saw a small burst of light. Another person had died. There'd be funerals and mothers would cry. Clover couldn't believe how dense people were. Death wasn't so bad, but she knew she didn't know much, yet. Not everyone who had ever died was around, by a long shot; she didn't know all ins and outs yet. Until the next phase of being dead cycled through her,

she was going to think a lot about Sasha and Tank, and Audrey Hepburn. And damn, she was keeping an eye out for John, Paul, Ringo, George. And she wasn't the only one.

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