

Keep Your Friends Close

Fiction

In early December 2017, fierce Santa Ana winds pushed a wildfire over the dry hills north of Los Angeles into the Topatopa Mountains that ring the town of Ojai. The inferno lasted eight days, filling the Ojai Valley with an unearthly roar and a blanket of smoke that extinguished the sun as everyone fled.

When they came back, the outdoor bookstore, the Turtle Conservancy, the cafés that roasted their own coffee beans, the tangerine grove on the way into town, the raised sidewalk lined with boutiques of handmade clothes, and the meditation centers were still standing but covered in four inches of ash. The turtles, some belonging to species that were nearly extinct, climbed onto their rocks, stretched their necks through the ash, and blinked.

No one in California could imagine the huge fires that turned entire neighborhoods to smoking weeds overnight and left other people gasping with gratitude for being spared.

But this story happened a year before that, a time of innocence, and it began six hundred miles to the north in the damp coastal town of Bayside, California. Alyssa Childs, home early from taking a deposition, stood at her kitchen counter and paged through the mail. She was fifty-one, married for twelve years, an in-house lawyer for a company that ran refrigerated trucks out of Humboldt County across the west.

She slit open a letter from a legal team in Ojai. Had she dealt with Watson, Elliot, and Watson before? Cool marine fog crowded the kitchen window and she could not see her car in the driveway. *It has become our duty to inform you that James (Jimmy) Acheson died on April 10, 2016, of a massive heart attack.* The letter went cold in her hands. She sat on a stool. The fog swayed. Jimmy, her ex-husband, ex-partner, ex-everything, who had stripped her clean and left her nothing, *deceased.* She'd often wished him dead, but now this, a feather against a gong. He'd taken an empty bag and emptied it again. She folded the letter.

Opened it. Something bequeathed to her by the decedent. She skimmed the words. A reading of the will has taken place. The house on N. Signal Street in Ojai. Hers. He'd left her the cottage they'd lived in for two years. Too late! Years ago she'd loved that house and had begged him to sell her his half. He'd refused, and the chirpy real estate agent working for him during the divorce had "liquidated" it for a pitiful sum of cash that she and Jimmy divided. Jimmy must have



bought back that house when he prospered. Why did she care? She didn't care! She was happy, deeply loved, Ojai just a twinge of regret from long ago. Yet somehow Jimmy had reached up from the grave and patted her heart, gotten a rise out of her one last time. She threw the letter in the sink, turned on the hot water full blast, stuffed the paper in the garbage disposal. *If you're dead, stay dead.*

She looked up the house on Zillow. Over half a million dollars. No. She typed in the address again. Yes. A fortune. She stared at the soggy papers in the sink and an image rose. Jimmy's little smile, the single small indentation, not quite a dimple, on the right side of his mouth. His quiet voice, pleasantly shaggy with weed, *I'll be with you always. Whether you put it in the bank or use it, you will never forget me. Now my name is on your back. Let's see what you do.*

She'd met him at a party in the hills, stayed with him at a rambling mansion where he was cat-sitting. He was two years younger than she was, a free spirit with just enough family money to let him do what he wanted. She skipped midterms. She was twenty-three and had hardly ever missed an assignment, a test, an appointment in her life. In a month they were married. The commute to her pre-law classes at UCLA was too great and she dropped out. He painted houses when he felt like it, spent most of his time in the hills smoking pot with his rich friends.

Two years later the owner of the cottage they rented moved to a retirement home, and her son, who lived in Brooklyn, offered them a bargain on the tiny mortgage. They couldn't believe their luck. She used the money she saved from school — an aunt gave him his half — and she supported them with homemade tarts she sold to vegan restaurants in town. Her baking skill, long dormant, came from her mother, who had died the year before, leaving four grown children and a husband, a circuit judge in LA. Alyssa's soft-spoken, apologetic mother had spent her life folding towels into exact thirds, laying out the next day's clothes for everyone in the family — including the perfect tie for Alyssa's father — and baking. She told Alyssa once that if you made happiness a goal, happiness would never come.

Alyssa loved Ojai's delicate air and Jimmy's contempt for the future. She'd admired her father's friends — driven people — all her life, but something changed. Jimmy said he lived for love. Lived to love her. Until the night he loved their neighbor, a potter, more.

A few minutes or an hour passed. Alyssa's husband, David, materialized in the fog swirling across the driveway, a messenger from the present. Sensing something, he waved from the front yard, then came in with a waft of cool air. "Whew," he said, looking at her. "Braille weather." He put down his carryall of papers. "What?"



She threw her arms around him, and he held her in silence. He had the profound ability to wait for an answer. A professor of philosophy at Humboldt State, he spent hours puzzling over thick texts, saying that he loved the struggle of getting close to the knotted mysteries of life. “But don’t you want to do more than get *close*?” she’d asked once.

He’d nodded solemnly. “Walk into the flame, yes.” He’d smiled. “But only if you come with me.” In the mornings she’d sometimes wake with her upturned face against his ribs, his slow heartbeat on her cheek. Her mother was wrong.

She could only get a middle seat on the plane to Bob Hope Airport, but against all odds, the seats on the aisle and window stayed empty. David, near the end of spring semester, had stayed behind, telling her that she should at least look at the house before selling it.

Alyssa took out the manila folder she’d labeled “Damn Jimmy” and spread out the papers on the tray table. Jimmy’s lawyer had enclosed the obituary in the *LA Times*. Local boy makes good. Local boy steals wife’s recipes and techniques, builds a multi-million-dollar company of frozen pies and tarts you can find in every good grocery store west of the Mississippi, beats his wife in court, and oh, by the way, breaks her stupid, naive heart, now healed. She took a breath. There would be a celebration of life at the Fair Winds Retreat in Ojai this coming Saturday, May 12, at 4 pm.

At the airport, David had taken her shoulders gently and said, “You need to go to the celebration, say goodbye to him.”

“Never. I was a kid. He was a mistake,” she said. “Done and out. No goodbye necessary.”

“*Your* mistake.”

“Harsh.” A pause. “I want to see the house. Say goodbye to *it*. Then take the money and run.”

He smiled. “I’ll see you when you get back.”

As soon as the plane reached cruising altitude, she brought up the street view of her old neighborhood and zeroed in on the low, pink bungalow. She turned the avatar to the house. No one had repainted the ugly, green window frames. Was that a shadow in the kitchen? She’d taught Jimmy how to roll out the dough right there where the shadow was standing.

It was Saturday afternoon, her weekend deliveries done. She’d rubbed flour on the cutting board and placed the ball of dough on it. “You have to understand that for crust, perfect equals not good.”

“Alyssa speaks,” Jimmy had said. He stood behind her and leaned over her shoulder to watch.

“Now don’t distract me.” Her hands were covered in flour. “Don’t



work it too much, it will get tough.” She wanted to teach him something; show him she had something to teach.

He rested his forearms on her breasts. “Don’t work it,” he repeated solemnly.

“Ha,” she said. She didn’t want to give in to desire yet. Those days were filled with desire; he was hardly her first, but he kindled a heat that later bloomed with other men, other times, David, but started with him.

That heat came over her on the plane. Turned on by a dead man. A careless, destroying ass hat. Her body rose, damn it, and her face burned, though no one could see. Even now she didn’t want to give in to him. He’d never understood how valuable she was. No matter what he stole from her, he acted like it was nothing much. She opened the tray table, and it dropped with a crack. She wished she had something she wanted to read.

She took her time driving the rental Honda north through Ventura, over the low mountains, and into the bowl of Ojai. Mottled clouds turned a slight orange above the setting sun. She’d almost forgotten the Ojai air that carried the remembrance of the ocean forty miles away, the hard dirt of the Central Valley from the other direction, and its own lilies, leftover hippies, seeded bread those hippies still baked for tiny restaurants, and dusty blackberries that could be picked by the side of the road and made into a pie if someone had more hope than sense.

The lawyer had said she could pick up the key from him, but instead she drove straight to the pink house behind the organic wine-tasting room and stopped.

The house seemed to have sunk through the years, the door to the side yard where she’d tried to grow figs listing to the side. Scraggly roses gone to hips. Dirty windows. An aging cottage for a half-million dollars — California real estate, the biggest mystery of all. A thought struck: Why did Jimmy buy it? Had he missed her? His youth? He’d left her a puzzle she couldn’t solve. It didn’t matter. He was dead and she was rich, for whatever reason.

She walked over the tilted stepping stones and knocked, just to be sure there were no drifters, and there was Jimmy, as alive as could be, with deep ruts across his forehead, his boyish way of looking amused at whatever he saw, the dry stalks of blond hair raking across his brows. She stepped back. “You aren’t . . .”

“Probably not.” A slight shift of chapped lips that let the faint amusement cross his eyes. “But you are . . .?”

“Wrong house.” She kept backing up. He was a ghost and she had a real ticket home in her suitcase. “I need to check some paperwork.”

A worn smile. His eyes were bloodshot, his tan a blotch of freckles and red spots as if he’d been crying or roaring while pulling the



wings off something, but wait, he was young, too young to be Jimmy, probably early twenties, but exhausted or possibly drunk.

She said, "I'm looking for Jimmy."

"Aren't we all." He glanced down. "The bastard." He squinted against an emotion she couldn't picture. "I'm his son." He looked up. "Let me guess. An ex-girlfriend." He looked at her. "Or ex-wife?"

"What? They come knocking every hour?"

"Just about. Come in. I'm having a wake."

The small living room had been turned into an office with shelves holding plastic boxes of manila files; an Ikea desk shoved under the low windows; two computers angled toward a straight-backed chair; a small, light table by the hall to the bathroom. "Graphics," he said. "I'm a graphics designer," and he nodded, as if that made him think of something else. By the couch was a round table that was completely bare except for a bottle of Chivas and a paper cup.

He lifted the desk chair so it faced the couch and said, "I'm Elijah, named for my father's brief religious phase. Welcome to my kingdom. Former kingdom. About to be tossed out, thank you very much, Dad. So much for finally getting started." He looked at her. Frowned. "I'll get you a glass."

Alyssa sat on the chair. He didn't realize yet that she was the wife in the will. The moment tightened. The juncture of walls and ceiling was sloped, and she remembered being gently cupped by the house, held by it, safe just before some nameless journey.

She'd been so young. Sweet maybe, she couldn't remember. She remembered Jimmy sitting on the couch, his hand on her thigh. Sadness shifted inside her like bags of sand being moved. She didn't know what to cry for.

Elijah returned and sat on the kitchen side with his long legs straight, like Jimmy's. A pleasant smell of garlic wafted from the kitchen.

"I was born in this house," he said.

"I lived here."

He looked at her. "Oh." A pause. "I see. It's you, all the way from Humboldt."

She nodded.

He downed half the cup, looked at it, turning it. "He gave it to me, too."

"Not in the will."

He set the cup down. "No. The *will*, two sentences: 'I give everything to Miss Aging Cutie, my fourth wife. And the rest I give to First Wife X.'" He ran a hand down his T-shirt, Jimmy's gesture. "Not an exact quote."

His sorrow crept over her. Born here! His history layered on top of hers, smothering hers. "You could buy me out."



“What part of ‘starting over’ don’t you understand?”

She stood, felt faint. “I can’t do this.” She gestured vaguely to the interior of the house, the small, dark hall that led to the bedroom and spare room. With alarm, she caught herself wanting to run down the hall and out the back door, see how the little garden was doing, revisit everything. “I wasn’t expecting . . .” She turned back. “Everything’s exactly the same! Except . . .” Where was her purse? In the car. Getting stolen. “I don’t have to do this.” Her mind gathered. She didn’t. “I’m staying at the Chantico Inn,” she said. “I want the keys in my hand by ten a.m. tomorrow. You can leave the heavy things and send for them later.” Sometimes she had to ask company drivers for their keys. Asking worked. No one wanted cops and everyone wanted to save face. Drop the keys on my desk, she’d say. “Throw” was OK—she didn’t mind the dents by her blotter.

“Bitch,” Elijah said sadly, defeated.

She didn’t want to think about his defeats, his loss of his father. She fled.

The small hotel room had an overstuffed chair crammed between front window and high bed so, for a moment, the bed seemed inaccessible. Finally her mind cleared and she went around. Fully clothed, she got under the covers. Some clock was ticking. She imagined the pillow smelled of the same detergent used by her mother. She tried to sleep, then did sleep.

She awoke at nine p.m. with a picture of a sailboat in her mind. She sat up. This was the sailboat she’d buy for David. He hated the cold, year-round fog of Bayside, but there weren’t that many jobs for philosophy teachers and he liked his colleagues. Sunday mornings he and Alyssa would sit with their coffees at the marina, and he’d often say that one day he would win the lottery and they’d buy a sailboat and sail it down after summer school to someplace warm. Now she could do that! She could finance David’s dream. Imagine. Even if they just dumped the money in a retirement fund, *could* buy is 100 percent different from pure dream. Or she could buy a new car without thinking. Plane tickets to Montreal. She always wanted to go to Montreal.

Then she remembered Elijah. Her heart dropped strangely and there was a knock at the door.

“I have plenty of towels,” she called out. “Thanks!”

“I’m not the maid.”

Her thoughts made him exist! “Do you have the keys?”

A pause. “Yes.”

She threw off the covers. One shoe was stuck at the bottom of the sheets. She took off the other one and padded to the door in her socks.

He stood back politely on the little breezeway as she opened the door. Nothing in his hands.

She shut the door.

“Please,” he said. “I just want to talk to you.”

“There’s nothing to say.”

“I lied.”

She waited. No footsteps. He wasn’t leaving or explaining further. The quiet drivers who got caught were the hardest. They didn’t try to explain why they couldn’t make it to San Diego without getting high. They just hung their heads and asked for forgiveness. She’d tell them she wasn’t in a position to forgive, and then she’d go home to cry.

She opened the door. People had to have their say before they could move on. “I was just going out,” she said. “Maybe you can walk me someplace to eat.”

“It’s almost nine-thirty. This isn’t New York City.”

She glanced up. That faint smile. “And quit looking like him.”

He ducked his head. “Doing my best.”

It was a Mexican restaurant with a closed-off grocery section in the back. There were no other customers. Elijah had a Dos Equis, and she had a double enchilada that oozed a delicious, sharp white cheese she’d never had before. The waitress with a dishtowel pinned at the back may not have said a word, Alyssa couldn’t recall. She was having trouble tracking the minutes. But she was ravenous and she ate. He took his time. She could wait out most people.

“I should have said I’m his *biological* son.”

“All evidence to the contrary.”

That smile.

“My mother took me to St. Louis when I was a baby. She didn’t want to have anything to do with him.” A pause. “He didn’t fight it. Just let me go.”

That sadness. She blocked it out. “OK.”

He moved his cocktail napkin. “OK.” He took one of her chips. “Last year I looked him up, and that house was one of the addresses that came up. I lived there for six months before he noticed.” Another chip. “They should have brought salsa.”

She pulled the plastic basket to her side of the table. “You weren’t actually looking for him. Just a place to stay.”

He shrugged. “I was looking for him,” he said flatly. He thought about that. “My shrink said I wanted *him* to find *me*.” He signaled for another beer. She asked for the check. He could drink alone, finish the chips. She didn’t need his story on top of hers.

He continued. “But no dice. I set up shop, placed an ad, walked downtown every day. Nothing. I guess he spent most of his time in LA.”



She was exhausted. “You had to get out of St. Louis,” she guessed. He took a breath. “Have you ever been to Missouri? I needed a state with a better attitude.”

“And different law enforcement.”

He looked at her sharply. “You’re not like my mother.” A pause. “What do you think I did?”

“Nothing much probably. Mostly involving weed or a DUI or two, or both.”

There was silence. She stood up but the waitress was nowhere to be found.

He said quickly, “OK. You’re tough, I get that. Jimmy didn’t give me the house.”

“Hey there,” she called out to the back of the restaurant. “We’re leaving. There’s some money on the table.”

He got up with her, not leaving any money, his voice rising. “Jimmy said I could live there for a year! You could do that too. You get the equity. You saw the prices. Ojai is paradise. Ojai will always be paradise. Win/win.”

“No,” she said. When she was his age, she was married to his father. “Don’t be a baby. He’s not going to give you what he’s not going to give. You can’t force him. He can’t see you. He’s gone. He’s always been gone. I’m talking crazy and I’m going to stop!” She looked at the table, then stared at him.

Finally he fished in his jeans and pulled out some bills that looked like ones.

She slapped a twenty on top. “You can understand — I don’t want to be tangled up with Jimmy’s ghost.”

“I can’t help what I look like. I hardly know him!” he cried. She turned away.

“Not fair,” he said bitterly, following her into the fresh night. She tried to remember which way.

The street was black. “And I’ll thank you to keep your grief to yourself,” she said.

“I’m not grieving. Just . . .”

“Me too. I’ll see you at ten.”

He didn’t come by at ten. She waited until noon. She called David. He asked how things were going, and she said OK, she was about to see the lawyer, get the sale started. She’d tell him about Elijah when they had more time. She went to the Celebration of Life for some reason.

Chairs had been arranged in semicircle rows on the blindingly green grass of the lawn in front of an arc of old resort cabins turned into a spiritual retreat. Hand-painted vines and sunflowers crept up and around the small doors of the cabins. Some of the inhabitants sat on the



little porches, placidly watching the crowd of mourners duck under the real bower of white flowers and gather by the long refreshment table under a huge pepper tree. They held each other for long hugs. Jimmy's widow had shiny gray hair that fell in a short, straight waterfall. She was tall, too thin, her stylish dress falling from bony shoulders, bare legs, red heels. She looked hollowed out but she greeted everyone.

Alyssa thought she smelled pastries. She sat in one of the white chairs as far away from the refreshment table as possible. No Elijah. She put her purse on the seat beside her. Despite everything, he should say goodbye. He only had one father. She felt drab in her gray suit. Almost all the other women wore flowered dresses. Ojai, land of flowers. Perfumed air sparkled off damp petals. Someone must have watered in the morning. She thought of the morning scent of the roses at the house, standing barefoot long ago, sated, on the front step. Young. Loved. Jimmy had stolen that girl on the step and moved on.

And so had she. She wanted to leave but knew she had to wait for Elijah. He had to come! She willed him to appear. People had apparently been told to sit, and they suddenly filled the chairs. A woman in a damask jacket looked at the purse, and finally Alyssa took it on her lap and the woman took the chair. He could stand at the back. There was a violinist and a soprano who belted hymns into the fine air.

A minister in a bright-blue suit said some words. Where was Elijah? People got up and said that Jimmy was one of a kind, his own master, a comet, someone who made his corner of the world a brighter and crazier place. No one talked about loyalty and few mentioned friendship.

Alyssa rose, thinking wildly that if she spoke, Elijah would come. He had to say goodbye. That was the definition of a son, someone who said goodbye to his father, over and over, goodbye, goodbye.

She walked to the front, her heart pounding. She looked at all the people. They seemed like a field of flowers. She said, "I knew Jimmy a long time ago. He was very young then, and he didn't really see me." She glanced at the widow in the front, who didn't move. She was mourning, but she was no fool.

Alyssa breathed the pure air. "But Jimmy, I see you. I see you charming the haloes off the angels."

The audience laughed. "And then taking your cut."

They laughed harder.

Her heels were sinking into the grass. "I'll keep this short. But I want to tell you about Jimmy and the sun." She closed her eyes for a second. "One afternoon we climbed up to Manzanita Ridge to watch the sunset. He showed me how. He brought folding chairs and we set them in the weeds on rough ground. The chairs rocked when we moved. I wanted to look east to see the color reflected on the cliffs, but he told me that was for tourists. We were going to look west, like God intended."



There was a little laugh from the crowd. They could picture him saying that. She continued. "He showed me that if you hold your hand out with your arm fully extended and measure from the horizon, each finger counts for fifteen minutes before sunset." She held out her hand for a second. "We sat for almost an hour in silence, every so often measuring the sun's drop. Finally it sank right over the highway. He didn't move, just kept staring. It was getting dark. I asked him what he was doing. 'Holding the sun in my mind,' he said. 'I hold it just over the horizon. Don't let it drop. Everything stops. No death. You felt it, didn't you.'" Alyssa paused. Everyone was quiet. She said, "So if the sun doesn't go down today, you know who's behind that."

The widow laughed a little along with the others.

It was three o'clock on a Saturday afternoon and Jimmy was dead. She didn't tell the crowd that Jimmy had stood up in the sudden coolness and pulled her up and held her close, but she could tell he was thinking about something else. In that moment she knew, without a doubt, that he didn't love her. The coming night touched her back. It was a soft, fragile darkness that seemed unmoored from the falling sky. A magnolia loomed just to the side of her vision. She could feel its machinery of sap, respiration, its breath in the night.

With a start, she looked at the audience. She didn't speak, her mind flying, *Oh, Jimmy. Come back! I want to hate you again with all my heart.* She had kissed his neck, a soft, desperate kiss to hold off the next moment.

The audience waited politely and her shoulders eased. No reason. She had to finish what she was saying, nothing more, and so she spoke the old, calm word, "Godspeed." The crowd shifted in their seats as they felt her winding it up. "Godspeed, Jimmy." A few repeated it with her as the sun held the blinding grass.

Somehow she got to her seat, and more people came to the front and spoke, and then they all started to drift away and she saw Elijah slouching under the pepper tree.

He didn't move so she went to him. "You can start painting the house tomorrow," she said. "Same pink. I'll buy the materials. Send the bill to this address." She gave him her card. "Equity doesn't make itself." A pause. "It does. But . . ."

He ducked his head. "I'll call you with a progress report."

"Don't call. Paint." She felt as if she'd just materialized on Earth and wasn't sure how things worked.

"Got it."

She looked at the hills, the women in flowered dresses. "And then I'll have some other jobs." Maybe the roof, a new lawn. Something. There would be something that needed doing.



PAMELA GULLARD's short story collection, *Breathe At Every Other Stroke*, includes stories that have appeared in *The Iowa Review* and *Mademoiselle*. New work has been published in *Arts & Letters*, the *North American Review*, *TriQuarterly*, and *Sou'wester*.

