

In the untamed southwest, high within the yellow Mogollon Mountains of cloud-kissing ponderosa pines, carved-out canyons of red rock and fine white grains of desert sand, Madeleine Talbot was introduced to her father, for the second time. Both, recently thrust into life-changing circumstances—she, a bout with divorce and he, an invitation into early retirement—they decided to embark upon that much-talked-about-but-never-had-time-for vacation.

The morning flight from Newark Airport deposited them, after a brief Houston stopover, into El Paso, where they rented a proper Jeep Wrangler and, following the Rio Grande, weaved a northwesterly pattern through citylike traffic—past the Fort Bliss Museum, the Chamizal National Memorial near the Bridge of the Americas, the old downtown Magoffin Homestead, past the Tony Lama Boot Factory and Applebees where they lunched—over the stateline into New Mexico and onto Route 25, the thoroughfare bisecting the state top to bottom. It was the height of summertime and with the softtop rolled down and a back seat staking claim to an assortment of camping necessities, Madeleine accelerated; the dry heat whipped her golden hair, his few wiry wisps, about their sunburned, smiling faces.

With only her Movado, now sporting Mountain Time, and hardly a cell phone between them, their plan included “roughing it” for the next two weeks in the Gila Wilderness.

“There’s Gila Monsters in them there hills yonder over there... yonder...”

“Oh, Daddy.”

Richard Talbot, who feasted on nature shows, had come equipped with a digital camera and birding binoculars. Madeleine’s inclinations were far loftier than her father’s—to discover some peace of mind.

They drove the desert highway for four hours with only two bathroom breaks and a KitKat run to quench her father’s sudden craving for chocolate.

“First stop, Silver City. Dad, how about we spend the night around here, pick up some equipment, food...”

“Fishing rods.”

“Fishing rods? You don’t fish.”

“No. But I’ve always wanted to.”

“I don’t know...”

“Come on, it’ll be fun.”

The road crested and they were rewarded with the sights of a twinkling town tucked against rolling mountain foothills that appeared to grow straight from the rooftops. They passed the monolithic Kneeling Nun and the burgeoning colors of the Santa Rita Mine, turned off the main drag and headed into Historic Downtown. It was an artist’s paradise. A quirky, whimsical palette emboldened the galleries and cantinas. Tourists and locals alike mingled through the side streets, converging at the square at a neckbreaking speed of well-below saunter, a pace nonexistent in New Jersey.

“Let’s see the sights,” Richard said, motioning to a photography studio dressed up in lights and a neon green facade. “I was a photographer once... in the Navy. Used to record aerial photos of the fleet’s gunnery exercises in Guantanamo Bay.”

Madeleine glanced at her father while finagling a parking spot. He never spoke of those three years in Cuba.

“I didn’t know that, Dad.”

Really, what did she know about her father other than what he allowed her to see and the fact that he had worked three jobs from the time she was old enough to realize.

“There’s probably a lot you don’t know about me,” he said, as if reading her mind. Slamming the door, he looked over the imaginary roof. “I was busy. And then you were off to college. I’m sorry about that, Madeleine.” He shook his head, kicked a few pebbles. “Hey, you hungry?”

“Dad. Ever call me something other than Madeleine? I must have had a pet name. Madeleine’s... so formal.”

She had to keep him talking. Her eyes pleaded with his—don’t clam up on me now.

“I called you Midge.”

“Midge...”

“You were born... prematurely.” He stumbled over the words, as though memories could halter speech like a lodged chicken bone. “We were scared. Forty years ago, the doctors... they didn’t have the techniques, the machines, the know-how to keep you breathing. Keep you alive.”

Tears blurred her vision. Richard scrutinized the ground as if the answers to the universe were inscribed onto gravel.

“But you’re a stubborn one—thank God for your mother’s genepool. You survived.”

Madeleine came up along side and slipped her arm through his.

“Come on, there’s a little cantina on the corner. They might have some good chili.”

“I called you Midge. You were so small.”

“It’s okay, Daddy.” They walked, blending in, easily adopting the pace of the locals. His glasses darkened in the sunglare. “I’d like it if you call me Midge.”

Under a pink sky, they set out the next morning for Lower Scorpion Campgrounds, nestled within junipers and spiky agave below the Gila Cliff Dwellings. The Trail of the Mountain Spirits proved to be a harrowing route, winding steeply at a dizzying grade of hairpin loops and sheer cliff dropoffs. Breathtaking. On top of the world at Anderson Vista, the only thing between the Talbots and the belly of the 7,500 foot mountain was air.

“Dad, you’re too close to the edge.”

“Midge, I’m trying to get a shot.”

“Do you know how many people die each year thinking they can never die in a National Park?”

“No, why don’t you fill me in.”

“Dad, I’m serious.”

Richard lost his footing and stumbled over a loose rock.

“I’m not going to fall. Stop treating me like a toddler.”

Madeleine watched the seasoned man at the brink of eternity capture more than mountain portraits. Reaching out to him, she stopped and looked into her father’s face, a mirror image of her own. She recognized a feature flickering from beneath the aging, fragile flesh. It was the boundless strength of the human spirit. Unable to watch any longer, she turned, feigning interest in a coupon discovered at the bottom of her pants pocket. The slam of a car door brought her back to the mountain.

“Think I’ll take the wheel for awhile. You mind?” His voice cracked.

Madeleine couldn’t tell if it was in disappointment or mischief.

“Dad, you must be tired. I’ll drive. It’s okay.”

“I know it’s okay, but I want to drive. Why should you have all the fun? Now, what’s this contraption do?” He joggled the stick shift like a lad behind the wheel for the first time.

“Oh, Daddy.”

When Madeleine was a child, she felt secure as her father’s passenger. Why was it that now she found little comfort while he maneuvered the same curves and downgrades that she herself had managed so easily?

“Daddy... umm...”

“Midge, this is great. I’ve dreamed of getting out like this.” He raised his fist to the sky, mocking. “Take the suburbs, please!”

“Daddy... uh... maybe you should slow down...”

“Nonsense.”

Clouds over the mountains bruised a deep shade of indigo, the sky darkened. The first wet drop splattered on Madeleine’s forehead like the force of God’s finger trying to tap some sense into her.

“Dad, we’ve got to pull over and get the top up. No! Not here! We’re in the middle of the road, there’s no shoulder!”

“There you go again, like I’ve never parked a car before.”

“I’ll let you know when you can pull over.”

“You will not. I’ve been driving more years than you’ve been living.”

“I can tell.”

“What are you mumbling? I might be deaf in one ear, but I can still hear.”

“Daddy, please keep your eyes on the road!”

A turnaround in the pavement materialized from around a bend and he slipped the Jeep into the hideyhole. Nestled under an outcropping of red-barked ponderosa, sheltered from gusts and quarter-sized hailstones that now littered the mountainside, Richard turned to his daughter. She quivered as the cold and a sense of impending doom settled into her bones.

“Midge, I look at you and I see my girl all grown up, with the strength of this mountain... in her pinkie finger.” He touched her hand. “I used to be strong. Now, I can’t even walk near the edge of a cliff or tool around a winding road without you hovering over me. Is this what it’s like to grow old? Are you as terrified of me now as I was of you when you were that infant who couldn’t wait to start living?”

“Daddy, no...”

“Midge, I understand. You know, they call it the circle of life. But it’s more like a stairway. It’s how you handle the risers. Sometimes you get stuck in the corner. Many times you make it to the next level. And then, you get to that last step. There’s not going to be another.” He sighed, releasing her hand. “I want more. For the next two weeks.”

They were soaked through but she did not feel the icy thorns, only the sting of tears on her cheeks and disbelief that one day her father would be gone. She lifted her pinkie finger.

“Daddy, what do you say we swing around this mountain and find your Gila Monster?”

“Honey, I already have.”