

ALAN STEWART CARL

## Below the Surface

After a weekend away with Hannah's family, August headed to work with an unusual lightness. He ate three glazed donuts without guilt. He did not curse the crawling traffic. And he did not grumble at the ugly thatch of scaffolding covering the Armin County courthouse where he processed licenses and permits. The day before, Hannah had told him she was separating from her husband. Now, August thought only about the futures they might have together, oblivious to the courthouse's odd pops and creaks and the strange new tilt to his desk. That morning, August noticed nothing out of place -- until the building collapsed around him.

He was in the basement with an armful of files when he heard a guttural groan. He paused, unsure of what could make such a noise. Then the air erupted with a violent cracking of wood and the crashing of stone breaking against stone. The ground convulsed, heaving August off his feet, his files scattering and his mind twisting to make sense of a world falling apart. Splayed on his back, August watched the basement ceiling splinter like ice on a frozen lake and then tumble in a cloud towards him. His mouth filled with the taste of chalk. He had one thought: holding Hannah, the afternoon sun tangling in the curls of her mahogany hair.

"Augie. Augie, wake up."

Pain squeezed at August's head. He could see nothing. His lower legs burned and each time he breathed, he felt the steam of his breath gather around his face. He raised his hands and they struck a slab of stone, the roughness scraping his knuckles. He struggled to move, thrashing his body as sharp edges clawed into his calves and pinned his legs. When he screamed, his voice landed flat. The only sound was a hiss from a nearby pipe.

But hadn't he heard a voice?

August called out again, shocks of white cutting through his vision. The sugared taste of donuts came back acidic and foul and he had to grit his teeth to keep the vomit down. He thought of the wistfulness in Hannah's voice the afternoon before. "Craig and I are separating," she'd said and he had comforted her with a simple embrace, holding himself back, believing they had a lifetime for such things as kisses. Now he could barely breathe. Tears burned his eyes. Dizziness swept through him.

"Augie. Wake up."

He twisted his head to the side, sure he'd heard the smoker's crackle of his mother's voice. Her scent was there, too. Marlboros and Chanel, an ashy sweetness that had trailed her until she'd died in the hospital smelling of antiseptic and plastic tubing. That was four years ago.

"We're here."

August's eyes flashed open and there was his mother. She was young, her sandy hair held in place by a thick black headband, her round cheeks smacked with red, not yet sunken. She wore a long white dress wrapped at the waist with a rope belt. The sleeves flowed wide and loose, fluttering with every movement of her arms. She stood outside the car, reaching in to shake August's shoulder. *I know this place* he thought, looking past his mother at the smooth, red granite of a hill soaring upwards and then rounding into a huge dome. Enchanted Rock. He was twelve and his mother's fiancé, Donald, had brought them

there to meet his family. August slid out of the car and saw Donald hauling bags of charcoal out of the trunk. He was a solid man with a knowing smile and piercing blue eyes. He piled two charcoal bags on each shoulder and lumbered towards where dozens of his relatives gathered, all dark haired and tall like him. As a boy, August thought nothing of those people. But the part of him that looked on from the age of thirty-three could see his entire future moving amidst Donald's family.

August stood near the car and watched Donald and his mother share hugs and handshakes. After a moment, a girl about his age stepped out of the crowd. She was all arms and legs and a dark head of curls. Their gazes met and her eyes crinkled in such a way that August's throat clenched and his ears burned. When she approached, he could do nothing but stare, his hands twisting against the bottom of his t-shirt.

"We're supposed to ask you to come with us. Up the hill," she said.

August looked down at his feet and then up at the steep slope of the hill.

"Donald says you have to come," she said. "He's my uncle."

August looked across the park and saw Donald staring at him with those icy eyes. He licked the dryness from his lips and told the girl he'd come along.

She crinkled her eyes again and August felt she was the type who could forgive him for everything he'd ever done wrong.

"I'm Hannah" she said and spun around.

A few minutes later, August was the last of a group of five kids headed up the hill's trail. His lungs burned and his thighs ached, but he could not keep his eyes off of Hannah, watching the languid strides of her bare legs, the bounce of her curly hair. While his feet skittered and slid, she glided up the smooth, rust-colored sheets of stone, hopping over fissures filled with vegetation like mossy veins. All around them, the Texas Hill Country was jagged and limestone hued, covered in live oak and prickly pear. August thought he'd get lost on those other hills. But not on the bald slopes of Enchanted Rock.

On the large plateau at the top, the group stopped, all of them huffing and bending over to find their air. In every direction, the land rolled towards the sky. A cool wind whistled past. The three other boys, cousins of Hannah's, wanted to go find a cliff from which to spit. August saw Hannah's disgusted look and he offered to stay behind with her. Beneath the rubble, August smiled, remembering his first real moment alone with Hannah, how mature he'd been. How flattering. But when he heard himself speak, his voice cracked with puberty as he said: "Isn't this place weird? It's like some portal to another dimension."

Hannah laughed. The sun was behind her and all August could see was her slim silhouette, her body not yet filled with the curves she'd acquire a few years later. "It's not that kind of enchanted," she said, giggling.

The older part of August curdled, but the boy in the moment took Hannah's laughter as a sign of affection and said, "You ever see Ghostbusters? This could totally be like that building."

Hannah laughed again. Her eyes flashed as she turned towards the sun. "Come on," she said and trotted towards the far edge of the hilltop. August trailed behind and found her crouched behind a boulder, her hands digging through a purple coin purse. "Check this out," she said and pulled out two cigarettes, the ends crumpled and the tobacco flaking out of the top. She followed with a book of matches and looked at August with a sly smile. "Want one?"

For many years, August would tell friends of his first cigarette puffed in secret at the top of Enchanted Rock. He told the story in bars, at office parties, on first dates, in any moment he felt the weight of his own averageness growing heavy, as if a youthful indiscretion proved a lifetime of daring was hidden just beneath his rounded features, his forgettable brown eyes. He would tell the story knowing full well the deceit of it, knowing he had rejected the cigarette even as he knew the truth no longer mattered. The

telling and retelling had fused the lie with his bone and flesh, making it another piece of what made him whole. But there in the moment, as his older and trapped self felt his younger self recoil at the offering, he realized how total the lie had been. It was not a piece of him. He'd been carrying Hannah's story.

"That's fine," Hannah said at his look of dismay. She put the extra cigarette away and their gazes met. She touched his knee. "Thanks for saving me from my cousins."

August blinked and she was gone, replaced by the pitch of a fallen building, the weight of stone pressing against his legs, the heat of his own body trapped around him. His legs throbbed in rhythm with the ache of his head. He squeezed his eyes closed. He imagined Hannah at work, two counties away. Was it lunchtime? Was she calling home to talk to Elyse as she always did at noon, telling her four-year-old daughter that Mommy would be home soon? Had she told the nanny that mother and daughter were leaving for good? Had she told anyone?

A fishy smell filled August's head and, for a moment, he thought water might be seeping into the basement. Then the darkness lessened and he saw the moonlit lake where he'd joined Hannah for a high school graduation party. After their hike up Enchanted Rock, they'd met again at the wedding of August's mother and had continued to meet at every family gathering thereafter, Donald insisting August and his mother "were family now." At first, August thought Hannah was just using him to escape from her juvenile cousins. But by high school, she was calling him two or three times a week, regaling him with the minutiae of her life. "Claudine is a bitch," he'd agree. "Mark ain't worth it," he'd tell her. And when she'd say, "I wish you lived closer," he'd squeeze the phone and say: "Me too."

During their sophomore year, August stole a picture of Hannah out of Donald's wallet and kept it hidden between his comic books. It was a school photo, and although her half-cocked smile said she'd rather be elsewhere, August couldn't stop staring at the softness of her lips, her warm eyes, the long, tanned slope of her neck. Sometimes he'd slip a hand into his pants and imagine her walking into his room, her shirt removed and her smile wanting. The perversion shamed him and there were days when he could not look at Donald, sure his stepfather would see the incest in his eyes. But then she'd call again and he'd rush to the phone, wishing they never had to hang up.

"Did you know on Seventh Avenue there are stores that just sell buttons?" Hannah was walking briskly along the edge of the lake, the glow of the graduation party moving further away. In three months, she'd head to NYU. She was confident she'd end up working in fashion.

She tossed her cigarette to the dirt and pointed back at her friends, their shadows shifting against the fire. "Someday, they'll all be wearing my designs."

"You know I will."

She laughed and punched him in the arm. "No one does menswear."

"Then I'll wear a dress."

"You're weird."

He flushed and looked away. He wasn't going to college. He wasn't even leaving Arminsburg. "Not that weird," he said to his feet.

She stopped at a willow and grabbed hold of a drooping branch that dangled into the water. She moved the branch from side-to-side, sending ripples to the shore. "You'll have to come see me in New York," she said.

He smiled. "Of course I will." The young August in the moment envisioned her draped on his arm as they hurried between towers, dodging taxis, ducking into alleyways to kiss, no one knowing or caring they were cousins. But the older August knew there would be no such future, that he'd never make it to

New York, too poor, too afraid but mainly too crushed by the endless stream of boyfriends Hannah would acquire and leave as fast as she changed her majors.

“Oh, Augie,” Hannah said and released the branch, the end whipping out of the water and spraying droplets into the darkened lake. “I’m going to miss you.”

“Me, too.”

Her eyes glistened. She tilted her head. He leaned in. Their lips met, warm and brief, the kiss ending as suddenly as it began. Hannah kept her eyes closed, rested one hand on his chest. He shivered. She turned away. A long sigh rushed through her lips, deep and breathy in a way that made August step back, sure he should apologize. But the older August who’d heard the same rawness in the passionate exhalations of other women, could detect no shame in Hannah’s sigh. *Kiss her again* he thought, even as his younger self fiddled with the coins in his pocket, his face growing hot and his tongue thick. Hannah turned towards him. He looked away.

“We can’t,” he said, sure that’s what she wanted to hear. Only the older August noticed the sadness in her eyes.

He licked his lips, tasting Hannah, sweet with alcohol and sticky with lipstick. Then, the taste spun, became the tartness of red wine. He looked up and there was Hannah again, older, hair cut short in the way she had worn it when she’d come back after nine years in New York. She was standing across a room filled with candlelit tables, the city lights of San Antonio twinkling through the large windows of a River Walk bistro. Only three months before, Hannah had called August, her voice trilling as she told him about a man she had met while watching a Spurs game at a Manhattan bar. “He lit my cigarette, and I knew he was the one,” she told August. When he laughed, she did too. But three months later, Hannah and Craig were engaged and enjoying an elaborate coming-home party filled with friends and family.

August gulped down the last sip of wine in his glass. He looked over to his mother, her hand reaching up and playing with the hairs on the back of Donald’s head. Her other hand was looped around the stem of her wine glass, the delicate bones of her fingers running in sharp ridges all the way to her wrists. August wondered why no one at the party had noticed her thinness. Or the sunken rings beneath her eyes. She was a week away from her first chemo treatment and yet she and Donald had spent the evening sucking down wine, devouring their racks of lamb and laughing at every joke.

“Aren’t you tired?” he asked his mother.

“She’s fine,” Donald said. His eyes were moist with too much wine.

August leaned forward, touched his mother’s hand. “I can take you back to the hotel.”

Her eyes widened. “I think they’re starting the dancing,” she said.

Speakers from the front of the dining room hissed and the first brassy bleats of a big band song filled the room. August’s mother stood and then stumbled forward, catching herself on Donald’s shoulder. When August raised up in his chair, she gave him a scolding look and then headed towards the large square of faux-wood the restaurant had set up as a dance floor. Donald followed close behind and August collapsed back into his chair. He grabbed an unclaimed glass of wine and took a long sip. Couples stood around the room speaking to other couples, their conversations a murmur beneath the music. August noticed Craig nearby, leaning with a few other men against the dark-wood bar in the corner. He was thin and stiff with a stern, ruddy face. He looked nothing like a man who would abandon a city and a job to follow a woman back to Texas. He looked exactly like what he was -- a banker -- dressed in an immaculate blue suit and spinning a glass of scotch in his hand.

“Isn’t he something?”

August turned to see Hannah, her hand resting on the back of his chair. "I guess so," he said and looked back at Craig. "He *did* follow you all the way here."

"It was his idea," she said. She ran her finger through the leftover cream on August's dessert plate and licked it off. "His parents have been begging him to come back for years. Hence the party."

"It's very nice."

"It's for him."

One song faded away and another began. "Want to dance?" Hannah asked. When August hesitated, she grabbed him by the forearm and pulled him to his feet. Her cheeks were flushed and a few curly strands of hair had escaped from their bobby pins. Without speaking, August let her lead him towards the dance floor, trying not to stare at her legs as they appeared and disappeared through the slit in the back of her sapphire-colored dress. When they reached the floor, he took her right hand in his left and put his other hand on her waist.

She laughed. "You waltz?"

He held down a blush. She had told him everything about the men in her life. He had only occasionally mentioned the women in his. "There was this girl..." he said and stopped, not wanting to talk about the smiley, heavysset woman at the courthouse who'd taught him to swing dance and who he'd left when she wanted to move in. "It was nothing."

"I've had those," Hannah said. "I'm done with those."

August pushed Hannah outwards, twirling her once, almost hitting another couple before bringing her back in. The other dancers filled in around them. "So Craig's the one?"

She took a step off beat. "Of course he is."

"Of course." He tried to regain the step but there were too many people on the floor, too many shoulders and elbows and pants cuffs.

Hannah planted her feet. "I know you'll like him."

"I'm sure I will."

"He's very ... steady."

"Steady is good."

"You know I need that."

"Yes."

A dancer bumped into the back of August, causing him to step forward, his body pressing against Hannah's. He could feel the softness of her breasts and the sharp points of her hip bones. They stared at one another. Her breath brushed warm against his chin. They were imprisoned by the other dancers, locked together in the middle of the floor. "Steady," he said again as he pulled her closer, their cheeks brushing against each other. He could feel her warmth through her dress as everything else in his life faded away.

"I..." he said, searching for words. Before he could speak, the music softened and the sound of excited voices rose to fill the quiet. The loudest voice came from Donald.

"Just give her some space. Give her some space."

For a moment, August held Hannah, closing his eyes. When he opened them, she was staring over his shoulder. He squeezed her once and then spun away, pushing through the mass of dancers towards a group huddled around someone lying on the floor. "Mom," he said, hurrying near and lowering himself to his knees. He took her hand. She was awake but she did not look at him, staring instead at something beyond the walls of the room. Her face quivered, her skin pale and loose as if it had fallen away from her bones. She reached out towards Donald who knelt down and took her other hand.

“It’s ok. It’s ok,” Donald said and placed his free arm beneath her head. August did the same and together they raised her up and helped her sit with her back against the wall. She frowned and laid her head on Donald’s shoulder. Someone said an ambulance was on its way.

From out of the gathering of onlookers, Craig stepped forward, his hands smoothing at the collar of his jacket. He cleared his throat. “August,” he said with familiarity, although they had met for the first time just hours before. “If there’s anything I can do ...”

August stared at him. “I don’t think so.”

“I know CPR.”

“She doesn’t need CPR.”

Craig stiffened and rolled his shoulders back. He looked ready to speak but before he could, two young paramedics rushed into the room and knelt in front of August’s mother. Everyone stepped back as the men shined a pin light into her eyes and asked her name. She answered in a distant voice. They took her blood pressure. They checked her pulse. The sight of it made August’s stomach twist.

Donald stepped towards him. “They want to take her to the hospital.” His eyes looked heavy and his cheeks were splotched with redness.

August watched the paramedics roll a stretcher into the room. “We shouldn’t have let her come,” he said.

“She wanted to.”

“She drank too much.”

“She was having fun.”

August glanced at his stepfather and then turned away. “*You* were having fun.”

A long sigh hissed through Donald’s nose. “Do you even care what she wants?”

Donald hovered for a moment and then walked away, falling in line behind the paramedics as they rolled August’s mother towards the front of the restaurant. August didn’t move. He wished the DJ would restart the music. Then he saw Hannah standing beside Craig.

“Is she ok?” Hannah asked, loud enough for all the onlookers to hear.

August saw Craig’s arm wrapped around her waist, her hips pressed against him. From beneath the rubble, August tried to will himself to say nothing. But the man in the moment could not take his eyes off the spot where the sapphire shades of Hannah’s dress flowed into the blue of Craig’s slacks.

With as wide a smile as August could force, he said, “I’ll see you at the wedding.”

He turned, hiding his face as he hurried to catch up to Donald. Hannah called after him. He could not hear what she said and did not dare stop. He walked faster, following Donald out the door and to the ambulance, where he climbed inside, and took his mother’s hand.

In the darkness beneath the courthouse, August’s body shivered and he could no longer feel his legs. *End, end, end*, he thought, clawing his hands into the floor, trying not to fall again into the memories that welled up from someplace deeper than memory. The visions came fast now, pushing through him, fleeing him. Light returned and he was stepping out of the Hill Country cabin where he’d spent the weekend with Hannah and her family. In the rubble, he struggled, watching the events of 24 hours ago and knowing, once they were gone, there’d be nothing left. He could not stop it. He kept stepping forward, down the wooden stairs of the cabin and towards where Elyse played alone, standing on a slanting dock that stretched into a scum-coated pond.

August had spent the morning reading as Craig and Hannah took Elyse to a playground. When no one came back for lunch, he went to look for the family, planning to offer them grilled ham-and-cheese sandwiches, a favorite of Elyse’s. He never missed a chance to spoil the girl. She’d arrived in the world

three days after August's mother had left it, and August had never shaken the sense that there was purpose in the timing. During the two years of his mother's treatments and false remissions and the final, slow descent, Donald had taken control of everything, forcing August to be a spectator. When she died, Donald was the one holding her hand. But when Elyse was born, August was the first person after Hannah and Craig to hold her swaddled body, to slip his finger into her tiny, wrinkled fist. He didn't want her to let go. For the next four years, as Craig traveled to New York and Chicago and London and Hong Kong, August was the one who took Elyse to the zoo, to the parks, to the natural history museum where she loved to sit in front of a display of local birds and listen to their recorded calls. "Your daughter's precious," people would tell him.

"She's my niece," he was careful to say.

"Elyse, sweetie," August called out as he reached the old dock. He didn't see Hannah or Craig anywhere. "It's not safe out there. Why don't you come to me?"

"No," she said with a huge grin. She threw a pebble into the water.

"Where's your mommy?" he asked, stepping onto the dock, the cracked slats of wood groaning at his weight.

Two more pebbles hit the pond, absorbed without a ripple into the layer of green scum. "Mommy said ... um ... she said be right back."

August looked up at the squat, stone cabin and scanned the surrounding trees, spindly live oaks stretching to the gravel road. He could see his truck and Hannah's sedan. A couple of teenage boys tossed a football one cabin over.

"I need to get away," Hannah had told him when she'd called that Friday afternoon. He'd assumed it'd just be her and Elyse at the rented cabin and was surprised to find Craig there too. The man was never around and, when he was, Hannah didn't invite August over. But the minute August arrived that Friday evening, Craig thrust a beer at him and squeezed his hand tight. For two nights, Craig kept August up late, talking about the best power forwards in the NBA and asking August to tell him about "the single life" -- as if Hannah wasn't trying to sleep in the next room. "She doesn't mind," Craig had said. "She's just glad I'm here."

August took another tentative step forward on the dock, the wood sagging beneath him. "How about some grilled ham and cheese?" he said to Elyse.

She shook her head and hopped sideways down the dock.

"But it's your favorite."

"No it's not." A spray of pebbles smacked the water and Elyse stared at her empty hands. She brushed them off on her denim skirt and then pushed the dark curls out of her face. "I need more rocks."

"Did your mommy say where she was going?"

Elyse crinkled her nose. "Maybe down here," she said and laid down on her belly, her hair tumbling over the edge of the dock and covering her face as she looked into the water.

"Elyse," August called and rushed forward. The plank nearest Elyse shuddered and cracked as he grabbed her around the waist and lifted her off the dock. As he ran on his tiptoes back towards the shore, she giggled, her little arms and legs smacking him as she squirmed.

"Uggie," she said. "I want more rocks."

"We need to find your mother." He sat her down on her feet and looked into the trees again. "What did she tell you?"

Elyse considered the question. Her eyes narrowed. "It snows where you are?"

"What?"

“In Armyburg.”

“Arminsburg? Sometimes.”

“We go live with you?”

“Sweetie. What did your mother say?” He was down on one knee, the wetness of the ground seeping through his jeans.

“Mommy says we go live with you. It snows there.”

Elyse was full of stories, yet there was a precision to her words, as if she were concentrating hard to say them right. He brushed the curls out of her face. He looked at the dark creep of moisture around his knee. “Was your Daddy there when she said that?” he asked.

Elyse wrinkled her brow and looked towards the cabin. “Mommy!” she said and spun away. When August looked up, he saw Hannah picking her way through the trees. She hadn’t heard her daughter and didn’t look up until she was all the way to the cabin. By then, Elyse was running with her arms held out and her curls bouncing. August followed at a slower pace and waited for mother and daughter to finish their embrace.

“You’re back,” he said.

Hannah looked at the pond and then at her daughter. She pulled Elyse closer. “Was she ...?”

“She’s fine.”

“I told her to go inside. We just --” Tears rimmed her eyes. “We needed a walk.”

“You o.k.?” He pushed away the urge to hold her.

Hannah stared at the water. “I told her to go inside.”

“She’s fine.”

“I can’t believe I just left her. What’s wrong with me?”

He stepped towards her, stopping an arm’s length away. “She ...,” he said and looked at his niece. “Elyse mentioned snow.”

Hannah’s expression tightened. She glanced at the road. “Go play,” she said to Elyse, giving the girl a long hug before releasing her. Elyse hesitated and then ran to the water’s edge, bending down into the dried mud.

“I wanted her to be excited,” Hannah said as she watched Elyse stack pebbles. She drew in a long breath. “Oh, Augie,” she said in the same way she’d said his name at the lake so many years before. “I didn’t think he’d be here this weekend.”

August kept his feet planted, said nothing.

Hannah crossed her arms as if against a chill only she felt. “Craig and I are separating,” she said. And then, in a whisper: “I thought we might stay with you.”

August could no longer hold his body still. He moved forward, wrapped his arms around her. She turned her palms towards his chest, her fingers light against him.

“Of course,” he said. “You know you can.”

In the rubble, he pleaded for a kiss. In the moment, he closed his eyes and stroked a hand down her back. There was no need for boldness. There would be years and years for them to find their way. Years of kisses. Of children. Years.

“Stay as long as you like,” he said.

She slid her hands around his ribs and across his back until the two of them pressed so close together he could only see the falling curls of her hair, the sun streaking through the dark strands.

Under the courthouse, the blackness crowded back and August strained to breathe. The world spun and he realized he could no longer feel his body, as if all his weight had lifted away. He closed his eyes. And there she was: offering him a cigarette, kissing him, dancing with him, standing on the cabin's gravel road, Elyse in her arms, both of them waving in long arcs as he pulled away.