

Going to California

By Patricia Crisafulli

Made up my mind to make a new start,

Going to California with an aching in my heart...

Led Zeppelin

It was an old exodus, to move westward drawn by the promise of the new and the untested, to find or maybe lose yourself, as the case may be. In the 19th century, the West beckoned with promises to be found at the bottom of a miner's pan, dreams of a fortune to be made by sifting through tons of the ordinary to find elusive nuggets that favored the persistent and the lucky. Twentieth-century voyagers went west for better climates of palm trees and business ventures, while tie-dyed opportunists sought enlightenment and their own brand of fellowship. No matter that times had changed and the Golden State's economy had tarnished in the twenty-first century, California still held a mystique that drew people in search of endless sunshine and a place to plant their dreams.

At the moment, Jennifer Dresden thought of only one sojourner, her 20-year-old son, Josh, who could not be dissuaded from the notion that his destiny lay as far west from Chicago as you could get in the Continental U.S. For weeks, Jennifer had appealed to logic, to facts and

data (the state-wide unemployment rate topped 11%), and to the last shred of her son's common sense, but there was no changing his mind. He had friends in Los Angeles, fellow musicians he'd met online who had day jobs as messengers and behind the counter in pizzerias, who knew of gigs and people who were looking for talent.

As a single mother, Jennifer had taken pains never to hold Josh back; raising him with a sense of independence and his own destiny, so that he would never feel, directly or by implication, that he was responsible for her happiness. "You can go anywhere, Josh," she'd tell him, over and again, painting a picture of the world as his to explore. Now, as she folded yet another load of laundry, mostly hers but also the last few things of his in the laundry basket, Jennifer wished she hadn't done such a good job.

For a dose of realism, she had told him how her younger brother, Robbie, twenty-three years ago, had done the California thing, as she called it; setting out after college with dreams of Hollywood and becoming a scriptwriter. He was back after three months, flat broke and disillusioned; now he worked in the human resources department of a corporation and did pretty well for himself at that. "But he had the adventure," Josh had retorted. "If I have to spend my life behind some desk, then I have to at least know I gave my dreams a shot."

She'd been speechless after that one, unable to argue against her only son's desire to define himself. Never had she told him of her own dreams, squelched before they had a chance to be explored, of the art school her father refused to consider, let alone pay for, and so she'd become a pharmacist instead. The only color palate she worked in was composed of little blue and yellow pills and red-and-white capsules.

Two stacks covered the top of the dryer: a taller one layered with towels for her bathroom, then her workout clothes, and on top her socks, and a second, shorter smaller pile of three t-shirts and five socks (the missing mate had yet to turn up) for Josh. When the laundry basket emptied of his things, he would be totally gone.

“Is there coffee?”

Jennifer leaned back to look out the doorway of the laundry room toward the kitchen where Josh stood in skinny jeans and a black t-shirt. Although just over six feet, Josh looked ten-years-old to her, which made her project him to be as unsure of himself as a bird on the edge of the nest, the way he had been in fifth grade when serious orthodontia made him afraid of always being different. Now, bright blue streaks cut defiant swaths through his blond hair.

“Check the pot. Should be some left.” She bit her tongue against the rest of her reply, that in the apartment he would be sharing with four other guys there wouldn’t be coffee waiting in the morning and groceries paid for by a wage-earning parent and laundry that appeared clean and folded at the end of his bed.

“You don’t have to do that.” Josh leaned against the door jamb, a mug of black coffee in his hands.

“Might as well start with clean stuff.” Jennifer stuck her head far inside the dryer to see what was left behind. Tucking blond hair two shades darker than her son’s natural color behind her ears, she reached for a sweatband from Josh’s last workout at the gym where they shared a family membership. He wouldn’t have that luxury in California either.

“No, I mean I can’t take much more. I’ve got two suitcases, my guitar, and a backpack. I’m going to borrow an amp, or buy one out there.”

“I could always ship yours,” Jennifer added. “Or maybe I’ll bring it out with me when I come to visit.” She silenced her too-helpful voice before she said more than she should and her suggestions hit the barrier of Josh’s newly constructed boundaries.

She’d done the same when she was eighteen and had left for an out-of-state college, setting up a tight perimeter for her own mother, a declaration of space and separateness. *You are not me*. Now it was payback time, as Josh delineated his territory and hers. The only breach was her insistence that he fly to California with a ticket she bought for him. His idea of advertising for a ride or to drive a car west for someone smacked of danger and dubious arrangements. The flight she had searched for on an internet travel site, paying one-way because Josh would not commit to a return date to visit, would leave in four hours.

“Do you want breakfast?” she asked.

Josh pursed his lips, which she interpreted as weighing whether to indulge both of them in one last home-cooked meal together. “We have any bacon?”

“Of course.” First, though, Jennifer gathered the stacks of clothes, one under each arm, and left the laundry room.

“I’ll take my stuff.” Josh reached for the smaller pile. “I know what I’m going to take and what will stay here.”

Stay here... The words seemed overly promising, a hope that eventually he would come back after California proved to be a folly. The thought shamed her into admitting that she really wanted him to fail and return, and as quickly as possible. All her talk of being able to go anywhere and do anything had been the false lines of what she thought she was supposed to say, when what she really wanted to tell him from the moment he’d taken his first steps was that he couldn’t go too far, too fast.

“Do you want eggs, too?” she asked.

“Sure. Scrambled.” Josh tossed his head and his hair, more dry than wet now after his shower, rose in a wave and landed in his eyes.

Pushing the eggs around in the pan, Jennifer flipped through mental pictures, thinking back to the other house, the one that the three of them had occupied, before this townhouse that she could more easily afford on her own. She recalled squatting at the end of the block, her hands outstretched toward Josh on his two-wheeler while Derek ran behind and then let go. She’d coached and clapped all the way to the corner, where Josh put down his toes and stopped himself. An only child, Josh occupied the center of his parents’ universe; his every attempt at something new was noted and documented, from first step to a spoonful of new food. A middle child, herself, Jennifer lavished him with the attention she had imagined lacking in her own childhood, while Derek, the oldest of his family, relished the idea of his son as a trailblazer. After they divorced and Derek remarried, he had another child, a daughter who just turned eight. Now, Josh was his oldest, not his only, although Jennifer couldn’t find fault with him for any of that.

Derek hadn’t been thrilled with Josh’s plan to leave college as a sophomore. It was the one thing that had united the two of them, mother and father on the same page for once, until Derek caved in on Josh’s plan to give his music a try. Then Jennifer had no option except to follow suit, at first to avoid being the bad parent and later because Josh was leaving, with or without her support.

The microwave beeped and Jennifer checked the bacon strips, deciding they needed another 30 seconds. By the time it beeped again, Josh appeared in the kitchen, wearing a hooded gray sweatshirt.

“You should take your leather jacket. It gets cold in L.A. sometimes.” Jennifer put a plate of eggs, bacon and toast in front of him.

“I know, Mom.” Josh took a generous forkful. “I’ve been to California, remember?”

“I was there, *remember?*” Jennifer broke the intensity of her retort with a smile. “How old were you then?”

“Ten. You had that conference and I came with you. I drove the hotel nanny crazy and you had to skip the last session.” Josh leaned back and smiled contentedly, as if still pleased with his escapades. “It’s all your fault, you know.”

Jennifer set the frying pan in the sink. “My fault?”

“You brought me to California. If we’d gone to, maybe, Wichita or something I might have turned out more normal.”

Scrubbing the pan suddenly became urgent, allowing her to turn her back to him. Her hair fell forward, a veil to hide the tears that brimmed and threatened to fall.

“Hey, I’m kidding.” Josh touched her arm tentatively. “You’re a great mom, you know that right?”

Jennifer looked at her hands, submerged in dishwater up to the wrist, as if her arms were truncated, which was exactly how she left at the moment. Amputated. “For the record, I hate this.”

“I know. But I’ll be fine. I won’t do anything stupid. I’ll get a job and, if it doesn’t work out, I’ll come back.” He rattled the words and phrases off like a well-worked mantra, repeating the condensed version of conversations they’d have since his plan was first hatched. She felt one arm and then another wrap around her in a rare hug from him to her, opposite from how they

usually unfolded. Jennifer took her hands from the water mid-hug and held him tightly, keeping her fingers away so as not to get his clothes wet.

Jennifer parked the car at the airport, against Josh's wishes and his protest that it was completely unnecessary, that it would be better to just drop and go. The terminal swarmed with post-holiday travelers: people in business clothes, families with carriers piled high with luggage, and young people whom Jennifer imagined to be returnees to college after winter break. She stepped back from the check-in counter and watched Josh smile at the woman in the airline uniform who asked his name, took his e-ticket printout, and tapped on her computer keyboard. He produced a driver's license from his back pocket and a debit card, and accepted a boarding pass and baggage checks in return.

"All set?" Jennifer forced a cheerful smile.

"Yup." Josh hoisted his backpack on his shoulder.

"That's not too big?"

"Nope."

Jennifer stopped before his answers went from one syllable to silence.

The security line snaked four loops, but moved steadily. They stopped five feet before the entrance, knowing that this was the point of no return, where he would go and she would stay behind, waiting for the update, the email, the text, the voicemail, the call...

"I'll be fine, Mom, and so will you."

Jennifer leaned into the hug and held on for another moment, knowing it would have to last a long time, until she saw him again in California. Unless of course.... She stopped the thought, not wanting to imprint him with her silent hopes for failure and retreat.

“Don’t give up on yourself,” Jennifer announced into his shoulder. “Sometimes these things take longer than you expect. If this is your dream, you have to go for it.” She loosened her grip, but Josh tightened his.

“Thanks, Mom. I know you believe in me.”

“You bet I do!” Jennifer stepped back, forcing her hands into her pockets. “I know how talented you are. I know that you’ve got to give this a shot. There is plenty of time in life for Plan B.”

Josh sniffed and wiped his eyes once. “Maybe that’s what we’ll call it.”

Jennifer cocked her head and gave him a lopsided grin. “What?”

“The band – Plan B.”

Standing outside the security line, she watched Josh make his way forward toward the TSA agent who checked his ID and his boarding pass. He gave her a glance and a smile as he took his laptop out of his backpack and put his things on the security conveyor.

Waving back, Jennifer felt the tightness in her chest begin to ease as the moment of separation came and went. As she exited the terminal and walked toward the parking garage, she imagined the liner notes, or whatever they called them these days with digital music; the lyrics and musician credits, the bios of the performers, and a short mention of how the band had been named by the lead guitarist’s mother in the airport. When he earned his Grammy for best performer, he might tell the story, or it would be their private joke as she sat in the front row of the theater and watched him perform. She imagined her daydreams and musings floating up into a cloud of possibilities, trailing behind her all the way to the car and, at the same time, defusing like vapor toward the gate where her westbound son waiting for his flight, his future, and his fortune.

