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# CRUX

*Gabriel Tallent*

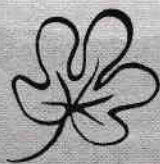


FIG TREE  
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*I.*

THE PRINCESS

*One*

He heard her crunching through the sand and then she dropped into the wash and came swaggering toward him in cutoffs, baggy white muscle shirt, and chuck taylors, carrying climbing shoes and an oversized hardbound lab notebook. The shiteatingest girl you ever saw.

“Hello, numbnuts!” she said.

“Hey there, Tams,” he said, rising to a stand. Together they followed the wash, two seventeen-year-old kids on the evening of the first day of their last year of high school. After a couple of miles, they passed through a break in low hills to a kind of parking lot full of discarded tires, shell casings, and used condoms, with plastic bags snagged in the grickle-grass. Nearby, the ruin of some strange purple house. Fridays and weekends, Dan and Tamma stayed away. This place could be a scene. It could feel not entirely safe. Once a guy had asked Tamma for “just a little dicksucking,” and she’d said, “Little in what way?” Weeknights, they had the parking lot to themselves.

The boulders lay singly or in huddles, forming alleys through which

they walked, kicking aside cans and red solo cups, until they came to the last and greatest of the rocks. She was thirty-five feet high, chai-colored, glinting with mica and quartz, the edges outlined in chalk. The route was Fingerbang Princess, put up by Jane Sasaki before they were born, and graded V4. The wind stirred sand from about their feet.

Tamma said, "Fuck me, dude."

"Every time," Dan said.

"I could puke. Could you puke?"

Joshua trees stood limned against the whiskey-gold horizon. The clouds were tangles of cotton-candy pink. The desert otherwise sere in the grayness, going to hills banded blue, pale green, and pewter, looped with ATV tracks, the gravel like shattered pottery. Though it was not yet quite dark, some few satellites showed in the bruised vault. She dredged her cutoffs with witchy fingers, played a quarter into her hand, showed him one side, the other.

"Tails," he said.

Tamma lofted the coin into the air, caught it on her forearm, and uncapped it: tails. Grinned snaggletoothed and cattywampus, big ears peeking out through tangled hair.

"Are you *scurred*?" she said.

"I ain't scurred."

"It's not dangerous if you don't fall."

"I think about that all the time."

Daniel Redburn set up in the dust, shaking his head, loosening the laces on an old pair of la sportiva mythos. He'd found these shoes in the dumpster at the Intersection Rock parking lot on some long-ago family venture into Joshua Tree National Park. In places, the rubber was worn down to the leather. They were stained brown inside with

somebody else's blood. Dan drew the slack up eyelet by eyelet. He had a patient way about him. Careful, tall, broad shouldered, and lean, with tousled blond hair, shorn close on the sides. His old man cut it every Sunday night, and knew only the one style, which he had learned by studying the brochure that had come with the clippers.

The Princess loomed above. She was a boulder problem: a short, difficult climb, usually protected with crash pads. But Dan and Tamma had no pads and so spotted one another as best they could. The route started in an overhang, climbed to a roof at fifteen feet, and then it was twenty feet of slab to the summit. He scooped forward on his butt. Feet on lego-block starting holds. He chalked his hands, clapped them off on his thighs, pulled onto the rock, and—first move—greased back off into the sand and sat laughing. He twisted around to look at her.

“I can confirm,” he said. “It’s still hard.”

“Isn’t that your dad’s catchphrase?”

“Such a bitch.”

She angled the flashlight down into the grotto. He pulled onto the rock, timed his breathing to the moves. There were edges he hit so hard that his vision dimmed when he caught them. Then he’d adjust with a hitching motion that started at the feet—kipping up to slack and reposition on in-cut fifteen- and twenty-mil patina rims, digging his fingertips into the deepest cranny of each. He threw desperate move after desperate move, with a gathering sense of wonder that he was still on the wall. His feet slipped off and he tucked his chin and fought for it, muscles cabling up out of his forearms. He groaned with effort, sure that he was off, but hung the move anyway, brought his right foot back to its edge, set it gently, and pivoted the heel right, then left, finding the angle.

He climbed to his high point beneath the roof, a crusty, full-pad patina rail they called the Last Homely House, because it was the best hold on the overhang, and a sort-of rest before the first crux. He took a few breaths, getting his left foot high, sinking down to the full extension of his arms. Then he pounced up for the roof, coming entirely off the wall, hands extended. His left was going for a teacup pocket just over the lip that Tamma called Tinkerbell's Bandersnatch.

He struck the pocket one-handed, sank two fingers, and willed them to hold. Then his legs swung out in a pendulum that ripped the pocket from his grasp and he was off, cartwheeling sideways. He had a wild flash of the Princess Boulder, the cobalt horizon, the desert, and then Tamma clawed her hands into his shirt and he cratered her to the ground.

Sprawled out beneath him, she started to laugh. He palmed down into the sand and she army-crawled away, cackling, and then stood herself up, knock-kneed, pigeon-toed, patting herself all over. Adjusted the straps of her bralette. Hitched up her cutoffs. Checked her teeth with her tongue. Hocked and spat. Examined it for blood. Tamarisk Callahan: figure of grace.

"You okay?" he said.

"I think . . . ?"

"Yeah?"

"I think . . . I'm okay."

"Dang," he said. Sitting in the dirt.

"Dang, what?"

"Dang, dude, we really need a bouldering pad."

"You know what Ray Jardine used to say?"

"Fuck Ray Jardine."

“A stone master, a total visionary, and what he used to say was—”

“I fucking hate this saying.”

“He had this mystical insight, which was: Whatever you don’t have, you don’t need.”

“Goddamnit,” Dan said, laughing.

“He called it the Ray Way,” Tamma said. “Which is just *great branding*, you know?”

Tamma went lurching over to her shoes. They were old TC prostrung with indestructible pink hockey laces. She started clawing them loose.

“I tell you what,” he said. “A bouldering pad sure would be *nice*.”

“Yeah, well, we don’t fucking have one, do we!”

“Jeepers, I didn’t mean to rile you.”

“I’m not riled,” she yelled. Then pitched her chuck taylors away into the dark and pulled one climbing shoe on.

“What is it?”

“I almost dropped you.”

“You didn’t drop me though.”

“I fumbled you and you almost swan dived into the dirt. I could feel it happening. I had this thought, like: I’m losing him!”

“You caught me,” he said. “It’s fine. What about Ray Jardine?”

“Fuck Ray Jardine,” she said, pulling on her other shoe ferociously, seething beneath Fingerbang Princess. “You’re right! We need a pad. *Dude*.”

“Yeah, dude?”

“What if one day I don’t catch you? I blow it and you take a header into the sand and you’re lying there all crumpled up and you can’t, like, move. And it’s my fault. What do I do then?”

“Dang.”

“And you’re just like, ‘Help me, Tamma, I can’t feel anything.’ But I can’t help you. What happens to us?”

“Pick up a rock, tell me you love me, and crush my face in.”

“No, thanks.”

“Just don’t let me suffer. Make the first hit really count.”

“And what would I do without you?”

“You’d be fine.”

“I’d never be fine again.”

“You’d be okay,” Dan said. “You spend one night astraddle your best friend, mortaring his face into chef boyardee with a granite pestle, and the rest of your life wondering why you can’t come any way but cowgirl.”

“You asshole!”

The maglite lay where she’d dropped it. The beam askew. From out the dark came glittering green flares and brief, smeary, holographic glimmerings: reflections off the iridescent eyes of spiders hunting the sand.

“Besides, it would add secret darkness to your backstory. Two children go out into the desert and only one comes out. You go on to become a professional climber. Travel the world with your black diamond sponsorship. At night you cuddle hard-sending offwidth babes in the back of your toyota, drinking whiskey, telling them about how, once upon a time, you were best friends with this guy and he didn’t make it. You shed a single tear. ‘He was so beautiful and so young,’ you say. ‘So mysteriously close with my mom. How she wept at the funeral!’”

“You motherfucker!” Tamma said, laughing, wrenching at her hair. “You dickhole! You can’t go ker-splating yourself. All we gotta do is

make it through this year. It's one school year that stands between us and a life of freedom and sendage and seeing Alex Puccio at the crag and asking for her number and getting shut down, but *gloriously* shut down. So don't joke about that: because you don't *get* to die. I won't let you."

"Oh yeah?" he said. "Are you worried about me?"

"Shut up!"

"Are you having feelings right now?"

"No!"

"Oh man I think you're having *hella* feelings."

"Fuck you I'm not!" she said. She'd gotten her foot into her climbing shoe, and now she stretched it out before her, took up the laces, and yarded them till they creaked.

"Dude," he said.

"Dude," she said back.

"*Dude!*" he said.

"DUDE," she cried. "I was! I was so scared for you!"

They sat in the dark together. Tamma underneath the boulder. One close to the other.

*Two*

Every day after school, Dan gave Tamma a ride back to his place. He'd strike north on a side street from the school parking lot, blaze down the highway, then turn onto unsigned double track through creosote and smoketree desert. To the west, there was a historic, tourist-trap type of a town, which Tamma liked to call Lone Coyote as a sort of joke, and to the east, a larger town she called 73 Coyotes. But Dan and Tamma weren't from any town. They were just from out in the desert, though the desert here was really a kind of vast, dispersed warren of properties slowly turning into vacation rentals. There were mansions, survivalist compounds, movie star bungalows, curated midcentury trailer homes, a twenty-million-dollar art installation, and a six-story aluminum pyramid. Dan's place was a single-story cottage where whip scorpions lived in the siding and a horny toad waited on the concrete porch. He'd go inside, carrying his boots by the laces, and speak to his mother, Alexandra Redburn, through the bedroom door. Danny, is that you? Yes, Mom, it's me. Remember to do your homework, Danny. I will, Mom.

Tamma'd come sauntering in after him in run-down jeans and a

scissored-out Puscifer muscle tee and stand at the kitchen island, menacing the leftovers. From his mother's door Dan would turn around and catch Tamma eating orange peels. Chewing steak bones from the night before. She'd nab butter off the stick. Side-eyeing him as his mother spoke. "Dude," he'd whisper, meaning, *That bread is moldy*, and "Dude," she'd say back, meaning, *Don't worry, I scraped the mold off*.

Dan liked to get his homework done before they took off, if he could, because after, his hands would hurt too much to hold a pencil. The two of them would work in his room, Dan at his desk while Tamma basked on the bed, clashing her heels together, making use of Dan's laptop and the extravagantly expensive dish internet to watch videos of Sasha DiGiulian, of Akiyo Noguchi, of Alex Johnson, perhaps women's #2 at the IFSC Vail World Cup, pausing the video, closing her eyes, imagining herself climbing it just how Angie Payne had climbed it, laying back double bowling-ball slopers with a high left foot, flagging her right, powering left to a third sloper, then standing up to double crimps.

When he was done, he'd again speak to Alexandra through the door. Are you going out with Tamarisk, Danny? Yes, Mom. Well, be careful. I will, of course. Watch out for rattlesnakes. Yes, Mom. Absolutely.

They spent the first nine weeks of senior year getting utterly shut down. There were nights where they fell lower and lower down on the problem until Tamma was just rage-sobbing and looking at her pink, weeping, traitorous fingertips in disbelief. They shambled from class to class like car crash survivors. At lunch, Dan brought her into the bathroom to watch him piss. "What do you think?" he said.

"Do you have insurance?"

"No?"

“Don’t think of it as blood, then.”

“How should I think about it?”

“Your kidneys are girls no longer,” Tamma said, throwing out jazz hands. “They’re women now.”

Their finger pads were raw and forearms bruised black and Tamma’s tailbone hurt. What she’d said was, “My tailbone hurts, can you take a look?” and then she’d hooked her thumbs under her jeans and pulled them down without unbuttoning them. Dan, seeing her do it, had said, “Owow!” and she’d said, “Shut up and look at this,” and quartered to show her butt cheek, deep ugly green marbled with black, the bruise running from the dimples above her hip girdle down her left thigh, and he’d said, “What am I looking for here?” and she’d said, “Does it look bruised?” and he’d said, “A little.”

After their night climbing sessions, she would walk back home to her family’s trailer, grasp the bedroom window, beach herself over the sill, and lie in her dirty laundry, hurting all over, saying to herself that she’d never make it as a climber, that it was time to prepare for a life of taking margaritas from one place to another while slowly, inexorably, margarita-by-margarita, nacho-plate-by-nacho-plate, becoming her mother.

She’d crawl across the floor, mount up into her bunk bed, and in the morning, she’d wake, turn over, and scream her excitement into her pillow, because any day you were going to go climb granite was the best day in the world, her brother, Colin, saying, “Tammmmmmmmmma!” and Tamma swinging up off the pillow and saying “What up, asswipe?” saying it full of joy and sisterly affection, and rolling off the bed and coming down the hallway to the kitchen, picking her underwear from her butt cheeks, and finding the cheerios farther back in

the cabinets than usual and making a short hop for them, and another, and a third, pulling the box out, catching it in her cradled arms, and stopping with her mother's boyfriend watching her from the couch, the girl smiling for him, putting her fist up in the air, and slowly, oh so slowly raising her middle finger, looking at him with the smile plastered on her face, and the boyfriend pursing his lips and looking back down at his phone and shifting side to side on the couch in contained amusement.

School let out at three thirty, it was a forty-five-minute drive home, a forty-five-minute walk out, and sunset was just before six. Each night was colder than the last, counting down until it would be too bitter for night climbing and too much of a scene for weekend climbing. If they had free use of the car, they could drive out into the park and climb weekends and breaks, but they only had permission to drive to and from school. The moment when night climbing season would close, and they would have to give up on Fingerbang Princess, was fast approaching. The two of them walked out to the parking lot in early November, Tamma thinking goddamn she was sexy, striding out through the cold Mojave night like Washington crossing the Delaware; that was about how majestic she felt, and about how cold it was; and GODDAMN she was hot, you wouldn't know it to look at her, but goddamn she was, she was secretly hot, she was George Washington hot; her enormous dick barely fit into her golden knee breeches; and they walked again through the notch in the hills, Tamma saying, "Dude!—duuuuuuuuuude. Do you ever think, if we were, like, walking out here some night, and we, like, met the devil, do you ever imagine what you'd ask for? If you could give up your soul and have anything?"