

KINGS OF THE AFTERNOON

BY LEWIS SHINER

FROM SOMEWHERE BEYOND the ragged palm trees came the screaming of sea birds. He lay with his head in Kristen's lap, watching the lines around her mouth. Her voice, with its rounded European vowels, seemed to mingle with the hissing of the sea.

"...I had crawled to the top of the hill," she said, "and the water was close behind me. All I could smell was the burning of the bodies, and I knew that all of California was finished. They found me there, not conscious, and I was in a dream."

Landon closed his eyes.

"In the dream I was sleeping," she said, "and I was wrapped in a sort of blanket, soft, silver colored. From a distance I seemed to be watching and the sun was up but making no shadows and nothing seemed to be lighted, you know, but sort of glowed. Someone was carrying me, I could feel the hands, and they took me to the edge of a water. I remember the dark of it, and a mountain out in the middle. There was waiting a boat, and other hands reaching up for me. The hands, you know, were not human, but like fingers made out of rocks, and the body too was rough and lumpy. I had not then even seen the men inside the saucers, but I knew what they looked like.

"A big sail the boat had, black and stretching, but there was no wind. The hands took me and the boat moved away from the land.

"The sea was thick and clinging and full of odd lights."

Landon stirred. A seagull stumbled across the beach toward them, its body coated with dark, glistening oil. The bird rattled its wings with a noise like gunfire. Landon sat up, watched the bird stagger and fall into the sand, one dark, empty eye fixed on him. Landon pulled his Colt and fired. The impact flung the bird into a ditch beside the highway.

He lit a cigarette, the match trembling in his hand. The smoke hurt his lungs and he coughed as he stood up.

"Let's go," he said.

ALONG THE SIDES of the highway abandoned cars lay rusting in the sun. The sky was free of saucers and the wind carried the smells of the sea.

Landon drifted into a doze, waking as Kristen pulled into a weathered cafe beside the road. The big Pontiac convertible skidded on the gravel and jerked to a stop between two plastic executives.

"Where are we?" he asked through a yawn. The heat had glued his black sport jacket to his shoulders.

Kristen shrugged. "Here." A handpainted sign over the door read DON'S

CALIFORNIA STYLE DINER and a card in the window added “Yes We’re OPEN.”

The smells of grease and cigarettes drifted through the screen door. Landon opened it and stood for a moment framed by the doorway, leaving his sunglasses on, making no effort to hide the holstered Colt at his side.

A few executives lingered in back, sketching on their napkins. Kristen led the way to a booth and Landon sat down, his sweat-damp trousers squealing against the red vinyl. A boy in a soiled apron took their order, then went back to a row of beer mugs on the bar.

“Your eyes,” Kristen said, “they still hurt...?”

He nodded. A close call with a saucer the day before had nearly blinded him, the road melting into a steaming gash in front of him. He had fought the car off the road, tears streaming his face, as the saucer whipped away, leaving a mile-wide path of fire behind it.

Kristen, sitting with her legs stretched out on the seat, touched his arm. She pointed toward the kid at the bar, who had started to juggle the glasses he was supposed to be polishing. Landon took off his sunglasses. The kid was no more than five-eight, wearing boots, a T-shirt, and dirty jeans. His hair was shaggy and stood up like a brush on top, tapering into long sideburns. Light flashed off tortoise shell glasses that hid his eyes. A cigarette hung from his mouth.

The act was meant to be casual, but Landon sensed a desperation behind it, a hunger for attention and for something else as well. The executives had gone quiet, and there was a thump as one of the glasses hit the table on its way back up. Kristen suddenly caught her breath and then Landon saw it too, fragments of the shattered glass hanging above the kid’s head.

The kid stepped aside, catching the other two glasses, and the fragments pinged harmlessly on the linoleum. The kid casually dried his hands and reached for a broom to sweep up the mess. Landon noticed the red stain on the towel, the trembling in the kid’s fingers, the odd sensuality of his gestures.

The kid brought their hamburgers, puncturing the beer cans with sharp, graceful stabs of the opener. Landon couldn’t help but notice the way Kristen watched the kid. He put his sunglasses back on.

“Bring one for yourself if you like,” Kristen said. The boy nodded. He was older than Landon had thought at first, maybe early twenties.

“You have a name?” Landon asked.

“Byron,” the kid said. He ate a potato chip off Landon’s plate, then spun away.

“Hey,” one of the executives said as he passed. “Bring me a beer, will you?”

Byron smiled at him. “Fuck off,” he said casually. He brought a beer back to Landon’s table as the executives lined up meekly at the counter, perspiring in their dark grey suits. A small man with sores on his face came out of the kitchen and accepted their plastic cards with a conciliatory smile.

“Assholes never tip anyway,” Byron said. He turned a chair around and sat with his head resting on his folded arms. The executives filed out and Landon caught the odor of hot plastic as they started their electric cars.

“So,” Byron said. “You cats are like...outlaws?” He kept looking back at Kristen’s face, again and again. He rubbed the back of his thumb under his

nose and said, "I seen your car."

"That's right," Landon said.

"I mean," the boy said, a sudden urgency screwing up his face, "it's like...if I...I mean..." Then he spun out of the chair and out the front door.

"He's insane," Landon said.

"He is beautiful. Can we keep him?"

Landon shrugged and finished his beer. "If you want him badly enough."

As they started for the door the man with the sores said, "Ain't y'all planning to pay for that food?"

Landon turned so the light from the doorway glinted on his Colt. "Just put it on our bill."

"I never seen you before," the man whined. "I got to make a living too. I'm on *your* side."

"Tell it to Robin Hood," Landon said. "I'm only in it for the money."

They found Byron leaning against the front of the building, one foot planted into the wall. He'd taken off his apron and had a red zip jacket over one shoulder. He lit a cigarette and said, "Where you headed?"

Landon pointed north. "New Elay."

The kid took the cigarette out of his mouth and said something to it, too quietly for Landon to hear.

"What?"

"Take me with you."

Landon didn't like the edge of hysteria in the kid's voice. Before he could say anything, Kristen stepped in front of him and got behind the wheel. "Get in," she said to both of them.

THE LAND WAS GUTTED and torn for miles in all directions, rolling down to the oily Arizona coastline. Stucco crumbled from the walls of the shattered building, and vines tore the red tiles from the roof.

Behind a growth of acacias lay a burned-out neon sign that read **MOTEL CALIFORNIA**. Landon leaned against the sign, watching Byron. The kid walked in circles around the parking lot, sniffing the dusty air and squinting up at the sky. He squatted at the edge of the moss-filled swimming pool and tossed pebbles into the murky green water. The boy had been with them for two days now and hardly said a word.

"Come on," Landon said. "Let's see if we can find you a room."

They worked down the row of cabins until they found one with most of the furniture still intact. Landon kicked idly at a pile of rat droppings and poked into the corners with a broken chair leg. The air held the tang of mold, urine, sour linen. He wound a window open and let in the gritty ocean breeze. A cough gently shook his chest.

Byron stretched out across the bare mattress and locked his hands behind his head. A smile stretched his cheek muscles into tight cords. "Now what?" he asked.

On the horizon were the executive office towers, massive, opaque, impenetrable. They'd passed the residence blocks on their way into New Elay, equally fortified and remote. The buildings in between, Landon saw, had taken

their share of punishment from the saucers. Shattered glass and collapsed walls littered the sidewalks; glittering trenches of fused concrete cut the streets.

Kristen drove at high speed, weaving through the lines of plastic cars and fuming executives. Pedestrians, most of them in rags, stared at Landon with blank acceptance. A pack of children chased a dog with a mixture of malice and desperation. An old woman squatted to urinate outside an abandoned storefront.

Landon took a Peacemaker in a worn leather holster out of the glove compartment. Turning sideways in the car seat he showed Byron how to load and fire it. The kid wound his fingers slowly around the grip, his eyebrows contorted in an agony of concentration. Landon watched as the gun seemed to be absorbed into the boy's hand.

Byron stood up on the back seat of the convertible and took aim at one of the execucars. The driver turned pale and swerved across the road, glancing off the cars on either side of him. Byron rolled his head back and laughed at the sky.

They pulled up in front of a heavily barred store window. A pair of steer's horns were mounted above it. "A meat market?" Byron asked.

"Lots of cash, pal," Landon said. "The liquor stores are too dangerous anymore." He got out and looked back at the kid. Byron had taken his glasses off and was carefully putting them into the pocket of his red windbreaker. Without the glasses, the kid's moist, deepset eyes gave him an unearthly beauty. He vaulted over the side of the car, holding the pistol as if he'd been born with it.

"Just stay out of the way," Landon said. "No grandstanding. Point the gun but don't shoot it, all right?"

Kristen led the way in, carrying a Luger and a cloth sack. Standing in the doorway, Landon kept his own gun in casual view. He could smell the raw meat, his stomach reacting with reluctant hunger. The customers shifted quietly out of the way as Kristen emptied the cash box. Byron stood in the center of the room, radiating quiet menace.

Kristen signaled, and Landon went back out to the car. The crowd had more than doubled in size in the minute or so they'd been there. Up and down the block Landon saw people moving toward him. He started the car and began inching forward. Kristen pushed through the crowd and got in the passenger seat, holding the sack of coins in her left hand. Then she looked back and shouted, "Hurry up! What are you doing?"

Byron was halfway up the metal grille that covered the front window. "He's taking his trophy," Landon said. The kid swung onto a metal bracket and began to tug at the huge pair of horns.

"Son of a bitch!" he yelled, the horns giving way under him. He dropped ten feet to the sidewalk, landing in a crouch, one hand slapping the cement. The other still held the horns.

He vaulted into the back of the car, holding the horns over his head. Landon was astonished to see a few smiles and raised arms in the crowd. He leaned on the car horn, pumping the clutch, moving forward a foot at a time. The crowd stared at Byron.

Just as he began to make some headway a frail blonde teenager stepped directly in front of the car. She looked hypnotized. Landon swerved, brushing her aside with the hood of the Pontiac. "Idiots," he said. "It's their money we just stole."

He could see Byron, framed in the rear view mirror, holding the horns over his head.

FROM THE DOOR of the cabin Landon could see Byron slumped in a corner, mumbling and nodding rapidly. A bottle of pills was open by his foot, and his hands played nervously over a pair of bongos. A girl was stretched out on the mattress, writhing slowly with some internal pain or pleasure. The sight of her soft breasts and rumpled brassiere, her long legs tangled in the sheets, gave Landon a pang of formless longing.

"So fucking high, man," Byron mumbled, eyes swollen nearly shut. "This shit, this shit...so goddamned high..." His fingers twitched and fluttered over the surface of the drums, coaxing out a shallow, frantic rhythm. "Spinning...falling...crashing...saucers crashing, and like..."

Landon turned away. "Where *is she*?" the kid screamed. Landon walked to the beach, the hot sand working in between his toes, foam spattering his black coat and trousers. Behind him he could still hear Byron railing against the saucers and screaming for his mother.

The day was clear enough that Landon could see shadowy mountains across Mojave Bay. Among the litter of plastic and rubber on the beach he found a bleached skull and the bones of a single grasping hand. A fit of coughing took him and he crouched in the sand until it passed.

From the distance came a low vibration, like pedal notes on an organ. The flat disk of a saucer dipped into the horizon and disappeared.

THE MOTEL DRIVEWAY was crisscrossed with tire tracks. The smell of gasoline hung in the air. Byron's motorcycle was gone and Landon had a sense of foreboding as he pulled up in front of Kristen's room.

"Where is he?" he asked, not getting out of the car.

She looked worn, the lines of her face all pointing downward. "Gone," she said. "With four, five others. On motorbikes. They are after the saucer, I think."

"What saucer?"

"On the radio, it was. They say one low along the coast was flying, maybe in trouble."

"Christ," Landon said.

The tracks turned south along the coast road. Landon swung the Pontiac around after them. Unless they stayed on the highway there was no chance of catching them. Landon let the landscape on either side of the road melt into a yellow blur.

Eventually he realized that he'd been hearing a low screaming noise for some time. It seemed to be coming from ahead of him. Finally he saw a faint glow off to the east and pulled over. He got out and slammed the door, the noise inaudible over the throbbing whine.

The source of light lay over the next dune. Landon put on his sunglasses and drew his Colt. The sound carried a pulsing resonance that he could feel in his belly. He went over the top of the dune, his left hand pressed against the side of his head.

A saucer perched on narrow stilts over the sand. Landon had never been so close to one before. Its sheer size was overwhelming, at least a hundred feet in diameter. The entire surface glowed with a milky light.

Five men on motorcycles circled the saucer. They wore long hair and sleeveless denim jackets, their faces sunburned and expressionless. As Landon watched they wrestled their machines over the same rutted circles in the sand, again and again.

The riders ignored Landon as he walked toward the single abandoned motorcycle parked under the edge of the saucer. He climbed a flight of stairs into the underside of the ship, holding his gun like a talisman in front of him. The ladder opened into a small corridor, and Landon found himself in a curving passageway that followed the outside wall. The roar of the motorcycles and the high-pitched whine had both faded once he was inside and now he could hear the muffled tones of a human voice.

The luminous wall to his left suddenly gave out and Landon looked into the control room of the saucer. The walls were covered with cryptic designs and the air smelled like mushrooms. In the center of the floor was a raised platform; two figures were struggling behind it. Landon ran around the platform and pulled Byron off the alien creature, pinning his arms behind his back. Byron fought him for a full two minutes, the power of his anger seemingly endless. At last his strength gave out and Landon tied the kid's arms with his own jacket.

The gnarled alien watched the process with black, expressionless eyes. Landon caught himself staring at the creature, reminded of a crumbling sandstone sculpture. He forced himself to look away and wrestled Byron out of the saucer.

The other riders were still circling. The pitch of the saucer's whine climbed threateningly and Landon sensed it was about to explode. Byron struggled free, shrugged out of the jacket, and ran for his motorcycle.

"Leave it," Landon shouted, unable even to hear himself. It was hopeless. He ran for the shelter of the nearest dune. He got over it and slid down the far side on hands and knees. He burrowed into the loose sand and faced away from the saucer, coughing and gasping for air. In the last moment before the explosion he saw Byron's motorcycle silhouetted against the sky. It shot over the crest of the dune and tumbled gently into the sand at Landon's feet, throwing the kid harmlessly to one side.

Another motorcycle followed, and was caught in midair by the full force of the blast. There was an instant of total light, then absolute darkness. When Landon was able to open his eyes again, there was no trace of the machine or the rider.

He pulled Byron into a fireman's carry, wondering if they had been hopelessly irradiated. It made little difference. The boy made a few weak gestures of resistance, then collapsed across Landon's shoulders.

“WHY?” BYRON SHOUTED, slamming a beer bottle into the wall. “What’s stopping me? Who makes these rules that I’m breaking? The saucer men, that can’t even talk? The police, that are too scared shitless to do anything? The fucking executives in their little toy cars? *Tell me!*”

The kid’s anger seemed to have been building over the months, steadily, inexorably, since they’d first found him in the decaying cafe.

Three sullen girls sat on the floor near him, paying no attention to Landon at all. One chewed gum, another patiently put her hair in a high pony tail. “It’s me,” Landon said. “You’re putting my life on the line when you push things so hard. Mine and Kristen’s both.”

“If you can’t take the pressure,” Byron said, his voice suddenly quiet, “maybe you’re just too old.”

LANDON GOT UP from the bed and pulled on his trousers. Kristen dozed in a narrow band of sunlight, relaxed now, an arm behind her head, displaying the muscles of her ribcage.

Landon slipped on his stained white shirt, combed through his thinning hair with water from a pan in the bathroom. Then, almost as an afterthought, he buckled on his holstered gun.

The fading sunlight drew him outside. A mosquito sang past his ear and he idly waved it away. He took a pint of whiskey out of the car and stretched out on a lounge chair by the pool. Strange columnar mosses grew in the dark water, the beginnings of a new evolutionary cycle. Landon drank, shifting as one of the frayed vinyl straps gave way under his weight. The warmth of the whiskey met the heat of the sun somewhere in his abdomen and radiated away into space. A single bird whistled in the distance.

Gradually he became aware of a new sound, close to the scream of a saucer, but more prolonged. It grew into a siren, and Landon turned his head to see a police car moving toward him from the north.

He capped the bottle of whiskey and sat up, thinking of Kristen, vulnerable in the motel room. As he got to his feet he saw Byron leaning against the door to his cabin. He wore a black T-shirt, leather jacket, and jeans, his glasses hanging from one hand. A huge reefer dangled from his lips. He wore the Peacemaker strapped low on his leg, and his eyes were wary and exhausted.

Landon felt the pull of destiny, a movement of forces in planes perpendicular to his own. The approaching car, the tense, expectant figure of Byron, the murky pool at his feet, all seemed part of a ritual, a tension in the universe that had to be worked out.

The lower limb of the sun touched the ocean and the world turned red. Light from the police car streaked the evening as two men got out, carrying lever action rifles. Their khaki uniforms glowed ruddy gold in the dying sunlight.

Finally one of the cops said, “Put your guns in the dirt.” Landon held himself perfectly still.

Suddenly one of Byron’s girls walked out the motel room. The contours of her body were clearly visible through her sweatshirt, contemptuous of the law,

threatening civilization.

“Hold it,” one of the cops said.

The girl knelt by the pool, dipping one hand in the fecund water. “Fuck you,” she said, not looking up.

The cop raised his rifle, working the lever in short, nervous spasms. “Halt, I said!” His anguished voice reminded Landon of Byron. The girl ignored him, watching the spreading ripples.

The bullet took her in the head, scattering fragments of her skull and whitish brain tissue over the pool. Landon, only a few feet away, stared at her gushing blood in horrid fascination. He pulled out his pistol in a kind of daze and turned to see Byron with his Peacemaker already out. The kid opened up, cocking the pistol with the flat of his left hand as fast as he fired. The two cops seemed to wait for the shots to tear into them, spinning with the heavy impacts, dust splashing up over them as they hit the ground.

Kristen stood in the open door of her room, wearing a threadbare white cotton shift, still unbuttoned. Her lips formed an unspoken question, then she went back inside. Landon heard the sound of drawers opening and shutting, the rustle of clothes.

Byron spat the stub of his reefer into the dirt and picked up his glasses from where he’d let them fall. He turned the collar of his jacket up, rolling his shoulders in a protective gesture. As he got into his sports car he held Landon’s eyes for a long moment. Then he roared off onto the highway, his tires grazing the head of one of the dead policemen.

Landon left the girl’s body by the pool and began loading his things into the Pontiac.

A FEW DAYS LATER, swinging south toward Yuma, they passed by the old motel. Hundreds of people, most in their early teens, wandered through the ruins, their faces full of confusion and the gathering darkness.

ON THE LAST DAY of September Landon rode into town with Kristen for supplies. He waited in the car as the daylight faded, his feet propped up on the dashboard. Coughing gently, he closed his eyes and listened to the crickets and the evening breeze in the palms. The crunch of gravel startled him and he looked up to see what must have been fifty grey-suited executives surrounding him.

The fear that finally came over him was the result of the failure of his imagination. It had not begun to prepare him for what he saw. The men stood with easy authority, their meekness and submission gone without a trace. They carried heavy weapons that Landon had never seen before, intricate masses of tubing and plastic that conjured death and burning.

One of them stepped forward. He was empty handed, authoritative. “Where’s the kid?” he said.

Landon shrugged. “We haven’t seen him for a week.” Kristen came out onto the sidewalk and Landon watched the fear and puzzlement spread over her face.

Another gray-suited figure pushed his way through the crowd and addressed

the empty-handed man. “We’ve searched the town, J.L. He’s not here,”

J.L. nodded and looked at Landon. “Where would he have gone?”

“Anywhere,” Landon said, struggling for equilibrium. “No place.”

The man turned to Kristen, still standing in the doorway. “What about you?”

Kristen stared back, wordless, hostile.

Another man pushed through. “They’ve located him, J.L. He’s driving a sports car up the coast, towards New Elay. Some foreign job, silver, with numbers on the side.”

“Green’s outfit is up there. Have them take him before he gets to town. It shouldn’t be hard, in this light. And tell him to make it look like an accident. It’ll save trouble in the long run.”

“The saucers,” Landon said.

“What?” J.L. said.

Landon pointed to the weapons, the communicators. “You made a deal. You sold out the rest of the human race so you could keep on going the way you were. That’s why your buildings and your cars never get hit by the saucers. Because you sold the rest of us out and now they let you run things. What did you give them? Women and young boys? Gasoline? Grey flannel suits?”

One of the junior executives reached over and slapped Landon across the mouth. J.L. shook his head and the man stepped back. “Get out of here,” J.L. said. “We’re through with you.”

Kristen said, “You’re letting us go?”

“Do you think,” J.L. said, “that we couldn’t have taken you any time we wanted? That if we want you again we won’t be able to find you? We don’t care about you. It’s the kid that’s dangerous. You’re just a part of the scenery. Just part of California.”

“California’s gone,” Landon said, tasting blood. “It’s on the bottom of the ocean.”

For the first time Landon saw a hint of emotion in the man. “No,” he said. “Not as long as we have a use for it. As long as there’s a coast, there’ll be a California.”

“The king is dead,” Landon said. “Long live the king.”

He was talking to the sunset. The men were gone and Kristen sat on the hood of the car, smoking and looking out to sea.

From somewhere beyond the ragged palm trees came the screaming of sea birds.