

The View from Mt. Langley
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by Tim J. Lord

Tim J. Lord
1010 President St., Apt. 2C
Brooklyn, NY 11225
917-628-3176
timjlord@gmail.com

CHARACTERS

LEIGH

18; our guide, Shelley & Matthew's daughter

MATT

40s, and as seen in his mid-20s; a ranger for the National Forest Service, and formerly for the National Park Service

JAKE

18; native of Lone Pine and perpetually crushing on Leigh while being her comrade on many a mountaineering expedition

SHELLEY

As seen in her early – mid-20s, a ranger for the National Park Service and gifted mountaineer

RUSS

Mid – late 60s, and as seen in his 40s; a resident of Visalia, California, Shelley's father and Leigh's estranged grandfather

CASTING NOTES

During Act 1, SHELLEY is played by the actress playing LEIGH.

At the end of Act 1, SHELLEY is played by a separate actress.

In Act 1, MATTHEW as seen in his 20s is played by the actor playing JAKE, and RUSS as seen in his 40s is played by the actor playing MATTHEW.

In Act 2, the MATTHEW & RUSS play their younger selves.

SETTING

The eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada Mountains

In and near the towns of Lone Pine, Visalia, and Three Rivers, California

TIME

The present and twenty years prior

“It is not the mountain we conquer
but ourselves.”

—Sir Edmund Hillary

ACT 1

A domestic setting, but the light is strangely airy, crystalline. And also, at times, shadowy, as if clouds are passing by quickly overhead.

LEIGH stands alone onstage. There is a table nearby with maps, hiking guidebooks, a compass, a notepad, a pencil, today's mail. Beside the table is a large backpack.

She speaks to us.

LEIGH:

I have a picture of my parents.
They're standing on the summit of Mt. Langley, a peak
in the Eastern Sierra Nevada Mountains in California.
Fourteen thousand twenty-six feet above sea level.
The two of them are sitting
with their backs to the camera, gazing off towards Mt. Whitney in the north.
Looking at this picture, you get the impression
that they're the only people in the world.

And I have two other photos they took of each other.
The one is my mother with the western slope of the Sierras
falling away from her, dramatically, but gently.
High peaks and green forests and untouched mountain lakes
fed by spring meltwater.
The other is my father with the eastern slope behind him.
You can't see the eastern slope, of course, because it plunges away,
thousands of feet disappear with a single step. So what you see
is this lonely figure with the Owens Valley seemingly right behind him,
and in the distance: the Panamint Mountains,
the western face of the western wall of Death Valley,

In her picture, my mother is looking straight into the camera. Huge smile.
My dad is looking sort of down and away. Uncomfortable
with the camera's scrutiny.

I'm the same age now that my mother was then
when she and my father first climbed Mt. Langley.
It's the southernmost in a string of peaks over fourteen thousand feet—
we call 'em "fourteeners."

It's a hell of a ridgeline:
Mt. Tyndall, Mt. Muir, Mt. Russell, Mt. Williamson.
And Mt. Whitney—the highest of these.

LEIGH (cont'd):

But none of them are as special as Langley, even though
it's only just barely a fourteener, because it's—

For a long time I kept these pictures all together, a trio.
But recently, I hung the picture of my mother on one wall of my room
And the picture of my dad on the other.

I look at these pictures a lot.

And my maps.

I have a lot of maps.

And I have books about the geology of the Sierras.

I can tell you anything you want to know.

Like, the Sierras were formed as a result of faults
lifting up from the Earth's crust. It's hard to explain,
but if you imagine lifting up one side of a table so that the top
is at, say, a thirty degree angle, that's sort of what happened.

(She does as she's described.

The table's contents go crashing to the ground.)

Mess included. You don't shift the land like that without creating a huge mess.

The part where your hands are, that's the fault, the eastern slope.

That's why the Sierras are much more dramatic to see from the east
why everything east from the Sierras is desert,

because this immense uplifting of the land catches all the moisture
and creates a rain shadow that spreads hundreds of miles eastward—
basically all the way to the Rockies.

But back on the west side of the Sierras, all that captured moisture
is why the western slope is so pleasant and inviting. Green
with tall trees: white fir, yellow pine, incense cedar,
giant sequoias—the largest living things on the planet.
Some of them are more than three thousand years old and weigh
more than two million pounds and their bark is resistant to fire.

The western side, that's where we started. Me and my family.

And the eastern side is where we are now.

And Mt. Langley lies between with a special view of the way through.

Or so I imagine. So I hope.

The sound of a door opening, keys jingling.
LEIGH looks towards the source of these
sounds.

LEIGH:

But I can't say for certain.

Not because it's beyond description—though it probably is,
but because I don't know. I've never been. Not in person.

I'm not allowed.

The light shifts to something more everyday, something you'd expect inside a small, high desert house in winter. LEIGH starts to clean up the mess she made.

MATTHEW enters and sits in the living room of their house. He is still in his National Forest Service ranger uniform and doesn't say anything to LEIGH as he passes her.

LEIGH starts to talk but stops herself, and they both go in silence until...

MATTHEW:
You still planning to go out tomorrow?

LEIGH:
Well, me and Jacob—

MATTHEW:
Where you goin'?

LEIGH:
“Welcome back, Leigh. How was your trip?”

MATTHEW:
What's the point in welcomin' you. You're leavin' again tomorrow.

LEIGH:
Hey, Dad. Great to see you too. The trip was long but fine. LA's a polluted hellhole where you can never see the mountains that surround it. San Francisco's awesome but crazy expensive. And all in all, after my tour of some of California's institutions of higher education, I'm real excited to be back here in my, admittedly, backwater town but, geez the views sure are pretty.

(pause)

MATTHEW:
Anything stick out?

LEIGH:
Berkeley's cool.

MATTHEW:
But you're still leaning towards something on the east coast?

LEIGH:

Sure. Maybe. I don't know.

Why can't someone start a college in Bishop?

MATTHEW:

There is. It's called Cerro Coso Community College,

but your grades are too good. You're not goin' there.

Personally, I think you should go east. See some more of the country.

Try livin' some place different.

MATTHEW goes to the mail and begins to go through it.

LEIGH:

Where were you? Earlier today?

MATTHEW:

What?

LEIGH:

When I got in.

MATTHEW:

Workin'.

LEIGH:

I called the station; you weren't there.

MATTHEW:

I was out. Workin'.

It's a big district, sometimes I'm out of the office—

You never answered my question. Where're you and Jake goin'?

LEIGH:

We're not going tomorrow. Jake has to work.

Plus, you know, I thought we could spend some time together—

MATTHEW:

But you're still planning on some Sierra trip?

LEIGH:

Yeah.

How do you know that?

MATTHEW:

Jake told me.

Where are you going?

(silence)

MATTHEW (cont'd):
Leigh?
I'll know as soon as I check the permits—

LEIGH:
Tuttle Creek.

(pause)

MATTHEW:
You thinkin' about trying to climb Mt. Langley?

LEIGH:
It's an easy fourteener, Dad—

MATTHEW:
You know I don't want you goin' up there—

LEIGH:
Imagine it, a winter ascent of Langley, it'll be amazing—

MATTHEW.
No.

LEIGH:
I'm eighteen—

MATTHEW:
A kid—

LEIGH:
A high school senior.

MATTHEW:
You're still livin' in my house—

LEIGH:
It'll be fine—

MATTHEW:
Which route?

LEIGH:
Northeast couloir.

MATTHEW:
Jesus Christ!

LEIGH:

It's a breeze this time of year.

MATTHEW:

How would you know?

LEIGH:

I've researched it, I've scouted it.
I've done harder climbs in my sleep.

MATTHEW:

What if the weather turns?

LEIGH:

Weather reports are looking good for the next week and a half—

MATTHEW:

It's the mountains; they do whatever they wanna do.

LEIGH:

It's an easy trip, Dad—

MATTHEW:

There's other things than snow.
Lightning—

LEIGH:

It's winter—

MATTHEW:

All summer you were pullin' this crap; spendin' all your free time
climbin' mountains. I hoped you'd got it out of your system,
but you still haven't done any of your college applications.

LEIGH:

You're not paying attention!

MATTHEW:

What does that mean?

LEIGH:

The last year has been so amazing for me. I've done amazing things—

MATTHEW:

And now suddenly you're ready for a winter ascent of Langley.

LEIGH:

It's not a big deal.

MATTHEW:
Jesus Christ, Leigh.

LEIGH:
Sorry.
But I have lots of experience. Jake and I were doing class 3's and 4's all summer.
And that's all this is: an easy scramble. Hands and feet.
No ropes. Barely need an ice axe.

MATTHEW:
A winter ascent at high altitude?

LEIGH:
Jake and I have done winter trips in the mountains—

MATTHEW:
But not at altitude. You know how much harder
everything is above eight thousand feet.

LEIGH
Altitude doesn't affect me.

MATTHEW:
Like hell it doesn't. You're piling on levels of risk—
You're trying to give me a heart attack.

LEIGH:
You go up there.

MATTHEW:
Not anymore.

LEIGH:
Your rangers go up there.

MATTHEW:
That's my job, their job—

LEIGH:
It's more than a job.

MATTHEW:
It's what we do.

LEIGH:
I know, Dad.
We'll be as safe as we can be.

MATTHEW:
And that's as good as it gets, isn't it?

(silence)

LEIGH:
Her...day's comin' up.

MATTHEW:
Yeah.

LEIGH:
I could skip the trip with Jake. You and me could go to Sequoia,
like we talked—

MATTHEW:
I don't know. It's hard to get away.

LEIGH:
No it isn't.

MATTHEW:
It is this year. We're understaffed. Cuts in the budget. Thank you, Congress.

LEIGH:
Dad—

MATTHEW:
Do you know they still want to drill for oil in protected Alaskan wilderness? All of 'em
in DC say, "We're getting off oil." But all they mean is foreign oil.
Personally, I think they just want to kill polar bears and caribou—

LEIGH:
Dad, please—

MATTHEW:
Of course the polar bears are gonna die anyway, the way the Arctic ice is shrinking,
courtesy of our greenhouse gases. From what? Burning oil!

LEIGH:
Dad!
We said we'd go to Sequoia this year.
For her.

(silence)

MATTHEW:
If they keep it up there won't be sequoias anymore either.

LEIGH:
Dad.

MATTHEW:
I'm serious.

LEIGH:
(just looks)

MATTHEW:
Sorry.
I'll check the schedule tomorrow.
I'll see if I can find the time.

LEIGH:
Why can't you make the time?

MATTHEW:
They say it gets easier with time. But it doesn't.
The wound just gets deeper.

(silence)

LEIGH:
Or you could come with us. Up to Langley? We'd do an easier route—

MATTHEW:
No.

LEIGH:
Maybe it'd be good for us to go up there. Together?

MATTHEW:
It absolutely would not. Even gettin' near it...
It just makes me hate that mountain and everything it looks down on.

LEIGH:
But if you went with *me*—

MATTHEW:
It wouldn't be any different.

LEIGH:
How do you know?

MATTHEW:
You kids would get sick of me real quick.

LEIGH:
Probably. But we'd be stuck with you. So maybe eventually we'd give you a chance and start listening to your stupid old stories.

MATTHEW:
More likely I'd go crazy listenin' to your stupid new stories and hike all the way back to Lone Pine by myself.

(They share a smile.)

LEIGH:
So you'll come with us?

MATTHEW:
No.

(He starts to exit.)
Pick a different trip. I don't want you doin' any serious climbing, especially if it's at altitude. And you're not goin' anywhere near Langley. Go someplace safe. Go to Death Valley. And be sure to write out your exact trip plan for me—which you had better stick to. Be back when you say you'll be back and all—

LEIGH:
We've already made all the plans—

MATTHEW:
Then make new ones.
(beat)
Don't test me on this, Leigh.
(silence)
Welcome...welcome back.

MATTHEW exits.
JAKE enters, pacing in annoyed fashion
and is joined by LEIGH.

They are in a small park in Lone Pine.
There is a stream that runs through the
park and a highway that runs very nearby.
They are facing the Sierra ridge.

JAKE:
We could just go.
I mean, he can't stop us.
Not really, not legally. If we get the permits,
JAKE (cont'd):