

# THINGS UNSEEN

THE ISAAK COLLECTION  
DAVID T. ISAAK

*Things Unseen*

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# 1

When they took me in for the formal identification, my first impulse was to deny it was her; she looked different somehow. Yet it had to be Claire: the tiny diamond-shaped scar that just touched the left of her upper lip was unmistakable.

She'd carried the scar more than thirty years. Dad had been beating our older brother with a belt, and seven-year-old Claire tried to grab his arm. The backswing caught her on the lip with the beltbuckle. I'd like to be able to report that seeing blood oozing from his daughter's mouth made Dad remorseful; if so, he hid it well.

Over the years the pale diamond of skin matured into an ornament of sorts, a strange beauty mark that stood out against Claire's tanned skin. Or had before—with this pallor the contrast lessened, as if she were a fading photograph of herself. Her eyes hadn't been closed completely, and it looked as if she peered out through her eyelashes, glancing a little to the side.

The left cheek showed a florid bruise. Her neck was ringed with uneven purple marks, garish under the fluorescent lights; but beneath these wine-dark blotches was a black tone that seemed to go deep into her flesh.

Naked under nothing but a sheet—it was impossible to believe she didn't feel the cold.

After answering their questions, I sat in the row of hard plastic chairs lining the hospital hallway, the kind of chairs you find in bus

stations. I stared at the floor. If you looked just right, there was some kind of pattern in the blotchy tiles. I pushed my glasses up my nose and squinted. If you just barely closed your eyes and peered through your eyelashes the way Claire had, you could almost see a design lurking in the linoleum.

The deputy sheriff had left after the formalities, taking pains to ensure I understood Detective Bolles wanted to see me later in the day. The orderly stayed behind. He stood there in the hall and watched me with what must have been concern, a burly, ponytailed man with a golden name tag. *Leo Janus—Pathology*. A bright tattoo started in the soft flesh between his thumb and knuckles and swirled up to cover the whole thickness of his left arm, the hallucinatory colors disappearing into the sleeve of his green scrubs. I wondered how far it continued and why he had done it. Doesn't life leave enough marks on its own?

I felt Leo lower his bulk into the seat to my right. We sat quiet together in the hall. The faint sound of riotous laughter came from a television far away.



They insisted on giving me a tranquilizer and driving me back to my hotel. In my room at the Yucca Valley Inn, I sat on the corner of the bed. What was I supposed to do next?

Mourn? I wasn't sure how. My parents would have prayed, loudly and ostentatiously, but I wasn't a believer. Claire probably wasn't either—at any rate, I was pretty sure she didn't believe in the austere Lutheran God of our mother and father. What would Claire do if our positions were reversed, and I was under a sheet in the morgue?

I had no idea.

I wasn't even sure what had happened. All I had learned over the phone was that she had been found two days ago, murdered—strangled—in her home. The sheriff's department was stingy with the details. Perhaps I didn't press them very hard.

I'd driven up from San Diego, checked in just before dawn, and then headed straight to the hospital. Everything was still in the suitcase. It seemed wrong to unpack, somehow disrespectful, but what else was

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there to do? I've always been a reasonable, methodical person: waiting to unpack wouldn't change anything.

I'd brought enough clothes for three days; I folded these neatly into the top two drawers of the dresser. Toothbrush, toothpaste, and unwaxed dental floss I lined up to the left of the sink, but then I realized with annoyance the only place to plug in my electric razor was also on the left, so I had to move all my dental items to the right. No matter how you clean an electric razor there are always little whisker fragments, and I tried to make sure they stayed out of my toothbrush. I hardly needed a razor in the first place: I only used it to keep my beard trimmed and to shave about three square inches on my cheeks.

I found myself standing at the foot of the bed and looking at the empty suitcase. I didn't know how long the authorities would want me to stay out here, so I had brought plenty of work—and I had a conference paper that had to be e-mailed off in three days.

I unzipped the computer satchel, unloaded the stacks of papers and reprints, and took out the laptop and opened it atop the small desk. Motels all have tiny little desks, as if travelers never write anything more ambitious than postcards.

No reason not to knock off a few paragraphs right now.

I booted the computer, started the word processor, and brought up the conference paper, "Unconformities in Tertiary Sediments of the Sheep Rock Wilderness: Evidence for Post-Erosional Volcanism." I scrolled to the bottom. 'Despite what Everson postulated in 1943, there is'

There is. There is *what?* I must have known what I meant at the time I wrote it.

I turned to the stack of reprints on my left. On top were my bionotes for the conference, with a poorly reproduced photo of me at the head of the page. Everything about the picture was gray.

L. Walker Clayborne, PhD, is Ashford Professor of Geology and Geophysics in the Earth Sciences Department of the University of California, San Diego, and is considered one of the leading authorities on volcanic landforms of the Southwest. Dr. Clayborne completed his undergraduate studies at the University of Arizona—inexplicably my vision was blurring as I read—and received both his MS and

PhD at Stanford University. After postdoctoral studies at the Hawaii Institute of Geophysics—my throat tightened, and it became hard to swallow—he took a position with USGS to develop a new emergency preparedness program—I could hardly breathe, an eon of tears seemed dammed up inside me—for major seismic and volcanic events in the Western states—oh God Claire I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry—

I lurched to my feet and the chair fell over behind me. Blind, I stumbled to the bed, my fingers fumbling at my glasses, and threw myself down. I couldn't remember the last time I had cried, it had been years and years, even when Elizabeth and I divorced there were no tears on my part...

There were no tears now, either. I trembled on the verge. My whole body shook with the force of it, and I had to fight for each shuddering breath. My eyes burned. Part of me watched from a distance and noted the tranquilizer must finally be kicking in.

My trembling gradually subsided and I lay on my side somewhere between waking and sleep. Over on the desk my laptop gave a few urgent beeps, signaling that the battery had run low. When no one came to plug in the transformer, it shut itself down with a long electronic sigh.



I woke just before three in the afternoon. I took the time for a quick shower and trimmed my beard; at forty-four, there was already more gray than brown. I pulled on fresh khaki Dockers and a pressed shirt, topped this off with my old tweed jacket, and stepped out of the room.

I searched the parking lot for my Jeep before I remembered it was still at the hospital. My room was at the back of the motel, so I walked around to the front office. It was a stunningly clear desert afternoon, almost too warm for a coat. The parking lot and the front of the motel were decked out in full Christmas attire, the giant metal snowflakes and prancing reindeer bizarre against the backdrop of bare rock and Joshua trees.

As always in California it took a long time for the cab to come, but it was good I'd taken a taxi—the driver bothered to look at the card the officer had left. I would have driven to the County building

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over in Joshua Tree rather than the new sheriff's annex in Yucca Valley. This turned out to be a low-slung, concrete-block building with no architectural pretensions. As with most county buildings in the high desert, it was clear the designer had been told to build it fast and build it cheap.

Someone once said you know you're getting old when the policemen start to look young: the officer behind the counter was preposterously adolescent and blond. I explained I was there to see Detective Bolles; he replied politely that Bolles was with someone, but would be out in a few minutes. Would I take a seat?

I would. The waiting room was big, perhaps thirty feet wide, mostly empty concrete floor. The whole room seemed to have been designed to be as unwelcoming as possible. Were they afraid if they put in halfway-comfortable chairs that people would decide to hang out there and drink coffee?

Police radios crackled behind the desk. About ten feet away, a teenaged couple sat together. The boy leaned back in his chair, his body stiff, his arms crossed tight with his hands locked under his armpits; the girl had both feet up on the seat of her chair, and her arms hugged her knees to her chest. In the corner a middle-aged Hispanic man in well-tailored clothes sat rocking slowly in his seat, his gaze fixed in midair. I desperately wished I had brought something to read.

We all looked up as the heavy door by the front counter opened and a figure stepped through. It was obvious immediately it wasn't a police officer. The first impression was of a girl, short, slight, and seemingly lost in her dark, floor-length coat. The narrow, almost pointed face that stared out angrily between cascades of straight ebony hair corrected the impression—this was a grown woman, probably in her mid-thirties.

She stopped with her hand still on the door and stared at me as if in recognition. She looked straight into my eyes; her own were so black they seemed to be nothing but pupil. For a moment it seemed she was going to say something; but if so, she changed her mind, and instead tried to slam the door behind her.

A hand blocked the door with an outthrust palm and shoved it back open. Despite the blue suit and bolo tie, the man who stood in

the doorframe was clearly a cop. He had a big, tight smile on his face, and he pitched his voice high to carry across the room. “Drop through whenever you feel like telling the truth, Mandy.”

“Screw you, Rick!” she shouted back over her shoulder. She straightarmed the front doors open with surprising strength, and disappeared into the parking lot, her coat flying behind her like a cape.

The blond desk officer caught my eye and nodded toward the man in the doorway. I stood and walked toward him.

“Can I help you?” the man asked, wary.

“Detective Bolles? I’m Walker Clayborne.” I held out a tentative hand.

“Oh...oh, yeah.” He reached out and shook my hand, a single hard clench and pump. “Rick Bolles. Sorry about that. Having a bit of a hissy fit in the back there.” He consulted his watch, then drummed on its face with the fingers of his free hand. “Is there any chance you could come back in an hour or so?” He lowered his voice, as if confessing some character flaw. “With one thing and another, I haven’t had anything to eat since about five-thirty this morning, and I have a meeting in a couple of hours that’ll run right through dinner... Or, if you want, we could grab a bite to eat together...”

“Sure.” I didn’t care where we talked, and I suddenly realized I hadn’t eaten all day either.

“Okay. You just hang here for a second, let me grab a couple of things, and we’ll go.”



He came armed with a thick manila folder and a notepad, and ushered me out a side door labeled *Emergency Exit Only—Alarm Will Sound*. The sensors on the doorframe had been silenced by duct tape.

On the way across the parking lot he said, “Let me just say how sorry I am about your loss. It isn’t easy to lose somebody, and losing them to murder is as hard as it gets.” I made some noncommittal noise. The words sounded rehearsed, and I wondered how many times he had said them before. He didn’t seem insincere, but there was an incongruity between his sympathetic words and his hyperkinetic body



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language. Even though he was probably five foot six and slender, he seemed as if his skin could barely contain him. His dark-brown hair gleamed with some sort of gel or spray. “I want to let you know we’ll do everything we can. Claire was a nice person.”

I was surprised by this. “You knew her?” For me, police detectives were people in movies or newspapers, not people you knew personally.

Bolles looked over at me without breaking stride. “Sure. Well enough to say hello, at any rate.”

I felt foolish without being sure why. More to make conversation than out of real interest, I asked, “What was that woman back there so angry about?”

“Interesting you should bring that up. Means I don’t have to.” We arrived at a car, unmarked, one of those nondescript, oversized V-8s. Bolles looked at me across the tan roof of the car. The tip of his tongue came out and batted the center of his upper lip as he considered me. “You aren’t by any chance acquainted with that woman, are you?” he asked. “Or, maybe, you remember her from somewhere?”

“No,” I said, “why would you think that?”

“I don’t. Just a passing thought.” He tossed the keys up and caught them, and opened the driver’s door. I heard a clunk as the door on my side unlocked.

The glove box on the passenger side had a large sticker pasted on it: Smoking Prohibited in This Vehicle by Order of the San Bernardino County Sheriff.

“Buckle up,” he said. He backed the car out of its parking place, shifted, and then pulled us out onto Highway 62, headed east. “That woman’ paid us a visit to offer us information about your sister’s murder.” Bolles had very blue eyes, and every so often he widened them to underline his words. This showed the whites all the way around the blue and made him look slightly manic. “Problem is, you see, she claims the ‘information’ she’s got came from a dream.” He swung the car over into the fast lane, powered on past a pickup truck. To my annoyance, he lit a cigarette.

“A dream?” I was baffled. “So it’s some kind of prank?”

“No, nothing so simple. She does have some facts—facts she shouldn’t by rights know. Now, I pretty much doubt she got it from a dream—”

“What kind of facts?” I discreetly cracked the window.

“Now, Dr. Clayborne, you gotta understand I can’t really give you details. In a homicide investigation, we try to hold back a few things, things only someone involved would know. Our friend Mandy knows some of those things. For starters, she knows what the murder weapon was.” He accelerated us back into the right lane and gave a chuckle of exasperation. “The number of people who are supposed to know what the murder weapon was can be counted on my fingers, and I’d still have my thumbs left over. So either she really knows something about who did it; or, more likely— Shit, hang on a second here.”

He braked quickly, just short of making the car skid, and pulled us up behind a patrol car. Two sheriffs were on the sidewalk arguing with a gaunt, bearded man dressed in Army fatigues. Bolles jumped out, threw his cigarette to the ground, slammed the door, and hustled over. All three of the other men towered over him, but there was no doubt he was in charge. The voices were indistinct, but Bolles talked loud and fast, pointing back and forth between the men, gesturing back over his shoulder with an outstretched thumb. He threw his hands in the air as if beseeching the sky, and then pointed at the patrol car. He gave a terse order and then stalked back to our car. As Bolles slid back onto his seat, I saw the sheriffs ushering the man into the patrol car, but doing so courteously enough.

“Christ on crutches.” Bolles turned the key and pushed the accelerator. The engine roared, and we moved back into traffic. “Arresting pedestrians for public drunkenness? I wish we could get all of the drunks out of the cars and *onto* the sidewalks.”

“Where are they taking him?”

“Home, if they know what’s good for them.” He drove in silence for a few moments, driving skillfully but a little too fast. He blew out a hard breath, pursing his lips. “Okay. In any case, either Mandy knows something about what happened, or, more likely, somebody in my shop or in the coroner’s office has been talking out of school.” He snorted.

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“Of course, let’s not forget the possibility God Almighty revealed it to her. Take *that* to the DA and see what it gets you.”

“So are you going to arrest her?” I felt lighter already. Maybe this would all be resolved quickly. “If she knows so much, maybe she’s the murderer.”

“Whoa, slow down. For starters, I know Mandy; she’s not a killer. A little strange, but we’d be in big trouble if that were a crime around here. On top of it, women don’t strangle people to death. Just don’t happen. Check the statistics.” Bolles thumbed open a tin of mints on the car seat, tossed one into his mouth, and offered the tin to me. I shook my head. The detective sniffed, and snapped the tin shut. “Chances are she’s banging some blabbermouth in the coroner’s office. But if not, we can learn more by keeping an eye on her than by locking her up. And what are we gonna lock her up for? Obstruction of justice? A half-assed charge if I ever saw one, and it never sticks anyway. Look at Nixon. Look at Clinton.”

We wheeled into the dirt-and-gravel parking lot of a small diner on 62. More dirt than gravel: the dust rose up and clouded the windows when we parked. “Hop out.” He opened his door. “By the way, I don’t take just anybody to such nice places.”

Faux farm kitchen layered over with Asian knickknacks and several posters of American flags. Bolles behaved like a regular, grabbing menus from behind the cash register and leading us to a table before the waitress made it out from the kitchen.

I ordered breakfast, a safe bet anywhere. Bolles requested a health-plate lunch special that included cottage cheese and a soy patty. Our server, whose name tag read, *Ng*, flirted with him while she poured our coffee.

Bolles took a drink of scalding coffee and sighed with gratitude. “I appreciate your getting here on such short notice; I understand you were just leaving on vacation.”

“Actually, I was just leaving on a sabbatical.”

Bolles made a noise which could have meant he didn’t know what a sabbatical was, or that he didn’t see any significant difference between that and a vacation. “Well, let’s start by getting some background.”

“Of course,” I said, “but I really don’t think I know anything that will be useful to you.”

“Well, you might be surprised. Despite what the TV has this country thinking about ‘random violence,’ ninety-nine times out of a hundred the murderer is somebody who knew the victim. Suppose you just start telling me about your family, about Claire’s life—friends, acquaintances, boyfriends...especially boyfriends.”



Ever try to summarize the history of your family to a stranger? The fact my audience was poised to take notes made it even harder.

We ate, and I told him what I could. Our childhood in the suburbs of Phoenix. Our parents, both dead now, conservative and religious. Three siblings: Edgar, the oldest, brilliant in every way; me, in the middle, not nearly as smart as Edgar; and Claire, the baby, the rebel.

Edgar had sailed through school in theoretical physics, first at Johns Hopkins, later at Berkeley; for the last fifteen years, he had been happily ensconced at Cambridge, and showed no signs of wanting to move back to the US. I, on the other hand, had more or less trudged through college, smart enough to get good grades and acquire a decent transcript, but never able to mimic Edgar’s effortlessness. Intellectually, if Edgar was a figure skater, then I was a guy scrunching along in snowshoes.

Claire was another story entirely. Her interests were wide-ranging and seemingly erratic. Starting in junior high school, one week it would be anthropology, the next, Pythagorean philosophy. One day she was a committed communist; the next, an Ayn-Rand libertarian. In the early days, her enthusiasm was infectious; even if you thought her latest theories ranked with the belief that the moon was a wheel of brie, the force of her conviction was somehow thrilling.

As she reached her late teens, however, things turned ugly. Edgar and I were both closet atheists by the time we were in high school. (Well, actually Edgar calls himself an agnostic; he claims anything else is unscientific. After all, he says, atheism is a belief too.) But both of us kept our opinions pretty much to ourselves—is there anything

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more pointless than arguing with someone about religion?—and we even went through catechism and confirmation without a murmur of dissent. Claire just wasn't built to keep anything to herself, and she fought ferociously with my mother about religion and faith. Edgar and I were away at college for most of this, but we received constant telephone reports from the warring parties: my mother's tearful complaints and worries about Claire's soul, Claire's scornful accounts of our parents' hypocrisy.

I could agree with most of what Claire said about our parents' faith, at least in principle, but I might have been more sympathetic to her side of the story if she had not adopted weird beliefs of her own. At first I thought this was just to antagonize Mom—it was no doubt pretty aggravating to have a Hindu, a Scientologist, a Lord-Knows-What under one's roof. But as time went on, it became apparent to me that Claire had a genuine mystical bent she wasn't likely to outgrow.

She finished high school early, with a spotty transcript, and promptly stage-managed a fight that neatly resulted in her expulsion from our parents' house. She spent a thoroughly disagreeable—for both of us—week sleeping on the couch in my Tucson apartment, where she quarreled with me about everything from God to socialized medicine; and, although her intellect was undisciplined and scattered, I came to the uneasy realization that maybe *both* of my siblings were a lot brighter than I.

I saw her only occasionally over the next few years. Mom and Dad almost never saw her. She was in and out of colleges (all second-rate schools), and seldom stayed long in one place. I received cryptic postcards from the most unlikely of towns, ranging from Tulsa, Oklahoma, to Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. I had a few flying visits from her, and she managed to drop in on Edgar a few times; eventually, of course, there was Mom's funeral. She didn't come to Dad's.

She laughed when I said I was getting married, and didn't come to the wedding, though she did send a carved Senegalese fertility charm; when Elizabeth left me two years later, Claire observed she was surprised it had lasted more than six months—the implication being, I think, that it was my fault. Claire's day-to-day life was vague to me; I

had the impression of men, a lot of them, and probably drugs of some sort. Somewhere along the way, she buckled down and finished her BA, and eventually received some kind of graduate degree or license in social work, but she never seemed to find full-time work—or, if she did, she never stayed long at the same job. She often borrowed small sums from me, but seldom repaid them.

She had been in the Yucca Valley area for about six years—some sort of record for her, I imagine—and it seemed she might stay in the High Desert permanently. She once even steered a conversation around to the subject of loaning her money for a down payment on a house; I had quickly squelched this idea, and now I felt a little ashamed.



Bolles had listened quietly to my monologue, making a few notes, but toward the end I caught him glancing at his watch. “Can you fill me in on the rest on the way back to the station? I need to head out pretty soon here.”

We each paid our own check, Bolles keeping up a steady stream of pleasantries with Ng.

Bolles had just popped the locks on the car when his eyes focused somewhere over my shoulder, and he froze like a bird-dog on point. “Do me a favor,” he said in a conversational tone, eyes still staring past me, “get in the back seat and just play it cool.”

“Cool?”

“Just— Oh, don’t say anything, and act like a cop.” He put his fingers in his teeth and whistled, a nasty, loud shriek. I started to look over my shoulder, but the slightest shake of his head told me not to do so. He pointed his index finger over my shoulder in a double thrust—*you, you*—and then jabbed it down at the passenger-side door—*there, there*.

Act like a cop? I opened the back door, slid in, and shut the door behind me. Out the window I saw a scruffy man in his mid-thirties, hesitating by the crosswalk that ran across Highway 62. The man shook his head, but some gesture Bolles made must have changed his attitude. His eyes searched the highway as his palms rubbed up and down the

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sides of his grubby jeans. He shot one last look across the road, and then ran to within a few yards of the car. His voice was shaky. “Hey, man, this is really fucked up.”

Bolles opened the driver’s-side door. “Get in the car, Jesse.” Bolles climbed in and pulled the door closed.

Jesse hesitated, and then made a dash for the passenger-side door. He opened it, glanced side to side, then ducked in and slammed the door. He couldn’t have been more obtrusive about the whole thing if he had been wearing bells and safety orange.

Jesse’s eyes widened when he saw me in the back seat. “Who the hell is this?” Jesse demanded in a whisper. “I don’t know this guy.”

“Let me worry about who he is. This guy’s got nothing to do with it.”

Jesse continued to stare at me. Even from the front seat, he smelled of stale alcohol, the kind that sweats from the pores of heavy drinkers on the morning after. “What the hell you calling me off the street for? Can’t we get in my car instead?”

“Oh, good idea Jesse. That wouldn’t look suspicious at all. There’s a dozen reasons I might have made you get in this car. How would you explain my being in your car?”

“Well, what the fuck is so important?”

“Gee, I don’t know. Seems to me maybe you didn’t show up the last two times you were supposed to see me—don’t call—don’t return my calls. Basically seems like you’ve been hiding from me.”

Jesse hunched forward. “Look, man, Joop and his bunch keep talking about how somebody’s gotta be giving you guys stuff. It’s like they’re saying it around me just to spook me and see if I’ll say something. I’m scared pissless.”

Bolles made a so-what gesture with his hands. “They probably *are* trying to spook you. They know something hinky is going on, so they’re probably trying to spook *everybody*. Don’t be so paranoid.”

“You don’t understand, man. I get these phone calls, and there’s somebody there, but they don’t say anything; they just breathe for a while and then hang up.”

“Probably a secret admirer. Maybe you should get caller ID.”

Jesse patted his jacket pockets, found a pack of Camel Lights, and tilted one out.

“Hey!” Bolles snapped. Jesse jumped. “I know you’re not the shiniest ornament on the Christmas tree, but can’t you read?” He pointed at the no-smoking decal above Jesse’s knees. “No smoking in this car. It’s the law.”

Jesse stuffed the cigarette into a jacket pocket without bothering to find the pack again. “Listen, I’m scared of Joop, he’s fuckin’ nuts. I need to get out of this shit.”

Bolles lifted his hands, and for just a moment I was sure he intended to shoot his arms out and grab Jesse by the throat. Instead, he leaned across the seat, as if telling a secret. He draped his arm across Jesse’s shoulders; Jesse jumped at the contact. “Jesse. You’re scared of Joop?” His voice became very quiet. “You should be a lot more scared of me, you little fuck. Those disability payments you’re scamming off the State? You’re gonna need ’em for real if you screw this up. You want your PO to violate you on something? You want to bounce back with half a dozen new charges on top of it?” He leaned in closer, widened his eyes, and smiled. “Try me,” he whispered, “just try me.”

Jesse started to say something, but Bolles used his comradely arm around the shoulder to pull him closer. “Nobody else is on your side, Jesse. Try to be a little more cooperative.” His voice was calm, reasonable, like a school counselor who is a little disappointed. “Try and be a little more productive. And try not to piss me off. Above all, when I set a meet, we meet. Right?”

Jesse mumbled placating things, and he left in a hurry, tugging his jacket around him.

Bolles leaned back against the driver’s-side door, apparently at ease. He lit a cigarette. “Children, dogs, and horses,” he said. “You have to use language they understand. Sometimes I hate this pissheaded job.” He gestured for me to come up into the front seat and then started up the engine.

I asked if he could drop me at the hospital so I could pick up the Jeep. On the way, he quizzed me about Claire’s friends, lovers, involvement with drugs. I couldn’t help much. Even though my field



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work brought me out to the area frequently, I didn't see much of Claire when I passed through.

Bolles' voice stayed even, but I imagined I could hear growing exasperation. "Did she mention any other men you can remember? Was she living with anyone?" He glanced over at me, and I shrugged my shoulders helplessly. "Was she involved with any kind of religious cults or groups?"

"If there were any out here, then the chances are pretty good she was involved with them," I said. "I don't know anything specific."

"Did she mention anything about anyone she might have had contact with at the prison?" Bolles asked.

My astonishment must have been plain. I tried to envision Claire as—as what, a prison guard? A prisoner?

Bolles pursed his lips. "You didn't know she worked part time as a counselor at Eagle Mountain?"

I shook my head. "No...she never said anything about it."

"Ohh-kayy, then." He braked, and I realized we were in the hospital parking lot. "Think things over; call me if anything comes to you that might be useful." His voice said he'd decided I was a dead end. He handed me two business cards, even though I already had one of his. "The other card there is Wilson, our evidence guy; he'll be in touch with you regarding your sister's personal effects and other arrangements."

I thanked him for the ride and opened the door, but before my feet hit the pavement he added, "Oh. Appreciate it if you could give me your brother's phone number in, England, was it? I'd like to give him a call."

And why not? There was every reason to suppose somebody who lived halfway around the world knew more about Claire than I did. "I'll have to look it up and phone you; I have it on my computer, I imagine." Close family. "Umm—maybe I should stay around for a few weeks in case I can help with the investigation or something...?"

"That won't be necessary," Bolles answered. "Fact of the matter is, I'd discourage it. Just make sure we have your numbers."



The winter sun had already dipped behind Mount San Jacinto by the time Bolles dropped me at my Jeep. The long shadows pointed east, and I followed them a dozen miles to the entry gate at Joshua Tree National Park. I needed to spend time somewhere familiar, to stand on firm ground.

About seventy million years ago, huge stretches of California experienced a massive episode of intrusive volcanism. Rocks were sucked down toward the hot fault lines, melted, and then pushed up to form gigantic bulges just beneath the surface. When the blanketing soils eroded away, they exposed giant blocks of white, grainy stone which can still be seen from the Sierra Nevadas down to Joshua Tree.

I pulled over to the edge of the road and stepped out. The sun was gone now, but the rising moon provided plenty of light against the bright rocks and gravels. It had turned chilly, and I pulled my arms in close to my body as I crunched across the sand.

Claire once remarked that when night fell in the desert, you could immediately feel the cold of outer space seeping in. I had pointed out that in reality the Earth was reradiating its stored heat into the clear sky; there was nothing above the atmosphere from which to “seep.” Tonight, though, I could see her point; it did feel as if a chilled fluid were leaking down from the black sky.

At the first large jumble of rocks my feet picked their way up the easiest surfaces, avoiding any paths that would require me to remove my hands from my coat pockets. Sixty million years ago, these had been sharp cubes and towers, like gargantuan building blocks. When I was still working on my dissertation, Claire had visited me out here. She had been in awe of the weird beauty of the place, and had spoken passionately about the strange power that had sculpted the rocks around us.

I'd explained that everything she saw was the result of low temperature—rather ironic, I suppose, for a desert landscape. When night falls, the moisture in the air accumulates on the rocks, especially on any sharp edges, and hydrolyzes the rocks to a kaolinite clay. Clay expands when moist, and this chips away at the rocks, and removes the corners and edges first, forever rounding and softening the shapes, like an ice cube held under a running tap. The real sculptor here was the cold.

## THINGS UNSEEN

She laughed and told me I was describing the chisel, not the sculptor.

I knew so little about her, really. Maybe it's like that with relatives; because we grow up around them, we don't have to get to know them. With friends, there's a process of discovery, as we accumulate facts and insights; with family, it now seemed to me there were mostly assumptions and prejudices.

Atop a large boulder I stared out at the rising moon. All alone here in the darkness, but with the glow of Los Angeles in the sky over the mountains. No wife, no children, both parents gone, my brother on the other side of the Atlantic.

I suddenly needed to understand Claire, to know her; maybe in some strange way, to make it up to her. I needed to know what her life was about, how she lived, what drew her to this place. I knew the contours of the High Desert better than I knew the curves of my own face; but, for the very first time, I wanted to see them through someone else's eyes.

And I wanted to know what had really happened to her.

**David T. Isaak (1954-2021)** was an American author of both fiction and nonfiction.

Dr. Isaak held a BA in Physics and MA and PhD degrees in resource systems. His professional work spanned the globe, taking him to over forty countries. He co-authored three technical, nonfiction books on oil and international politics, and wrote numerous papers, monographs, and multivalent studies.

David had an eclectic life. His first major in college was music, and he played piano and flute. He was a certified Bikram yoga instructor, an accomplished vegetarian cook, a creative mixologist, and an avid reader of fiction and nonfiction alike. He was driven by great characters and story, original voices, and especially by his love of the craft of writing, all of which are reflected in his own writing.

David passed away in April 2021. The five novels he left behind are as diverse as his life. These novels form ***The Isaak Collection***.

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