

James Sievert

VALLEY OAK

by James Sievert

“California is the ideal landscape for oaks.” Arik, driving, was well into his botany lecture. With both arms stiff to the steering wheel, he kept his eyes locked straight ahead while speaking. He had a long, well-defined nose and a sparse, stylish beard that came down in two straight lines from his moustache and followed his jawline and broad chin. His blond hair was cropped close, giving him the clean, comfortable look of a park ranger.

Rob, the passenger, cocked his head attentively. He had the build of a first baseman—powerful forearms, wide chest, stocky build overall. His high forehead reached up to a receding hairline that gave a V-look to his short, dark hair. Fierce blue eyes belied a strong streak of sentimentality.

They were in Arik’s new BMW 325 convertible, descending the San Diego Freeway into the San Fernando Valley, at that spot where you can read the landscape like an aerial map—the transversal range of the Santa Susanna Mountains on the horizon, the expanse of flat land at mid-distance, and the manzanita of the Santa Monica Mountains outside the car window.

“And SoCal in particular,” Arik continued, talking above the car radio din. “You’d see paradise out there without this matrix of civilization.” Rob felt light-headed, the effect of high pressure and jet lag, admiring the wide expanse before him, contrasting it to the stone and brick and fog and feeble late autumn sun of Paris, which he had left behind a few days ago. It was a paradise to him, despite what Arik said. The sun-cut clarity of the light, the warm, sweet air scrubbed clean by three days of Santa Ana winds and two days of hard rain, a splendid November morning that held all the promise of Southern California. There was a deep-reaching quality to the day, reaching directly to his youth. It was light the

way it was meant to shine. The way mountains were supposed to look. The curve of the land.

From Arik's discourse Rob knew—now that he was home—that he had to discover all that was good about being here—the streams that still flowed, the oaks that still flowered, the hiking trails that still took him to breath-arresting vistas, and the hawks that still soared above home.

“The problem with L.A.,” Arik resumed, “is some people have these East Coast values of what nature should look like, as if in the fall you should have logs burning in the fireplace and snow on the ground. I mean, it's nuts. As if sunshine and low humidity were a dismal reality in December. I remember my first trip outside California, for a conference at Boston University. I was shocked at how green the landscape was.”

Rob thought of the savings and loan he had been to yesterday to open an account, the dark, cool faux New England-style wood-paneled interior with the flames of a gas-powered fire leaping up in a pseudo-marble fireplace.

The BMW inched its way into the Valley as a spectacle of brake lights twinkled on and off. Arik maneuvered the car onto the Ventura Freeway west along the southern edge of the Valley. Already they were among the oaks, or at least the place names: Sherman Oaks, Encino, Woodland Hills, Thousand Oaks. Spanish explorer Gaspar de Portola traveled this same stretch of earth in 1769 and called it *Valle de los Encinos*, the valley of oaks, clustered in woodlands and spread across the grassy flatlands. It was now a valley where oaks served as ornaments in parking lots.

Suddenly, a voice on the car radio came on, a voice Rob recognized but had long forgotten:

I mean, hello, this is America. And you're telling me I have to press one to get English? Think about that for a moment. Here we are in the United States of America, and we can't even get a call center that is

automatically in English. We've gone way too far on this slippery slope of immigration. Hell, we're not even on the slope anymore. We've slipped right off it into a European-style multilingual morass.

After the traffic cleared, Arik settled back and continued his botany lesson.

"The scientific name is *quercus lobata*," Arik explained. He was as fond of Latin as a Catholic priest.

"Lobata?" Rob asked. "What? Like an earlobe?"

"Yeah," Arik said. "The leaves on this oak have rounded divisions. Like lots of lobes. It helps them to withstand periods of drought."

Arik wasn't a conversation heavyweight. On the occasions he tried small talk, you could quickly sense his tearing-at-the-gut embarrassment. When he wasn't talking about plants, he generally wasn't talking. He was a scientist, but not in the classic absent-minded sense. He was classic Southern California: earnest, serious, and wholesome, with a dead-set purpose in life. He knew everything there was to know about California's native plant population. He shrugged his shoulders at everything else.

Arik continued his lecture as if he were talking to himself.

"The common name for *Quercus lobata* is valley oak. The tree is unique to California, and it's probably the largest oak in North America. Valley oaks prefer deep, rich bottom land soils at elevations below two thousand feet. The tree is typically found at least one ridge away from the coastal fog zone in valleys that are cool and wet in winter and hot and dry in summer."

Arik exited the freeway and pulled into a gas station. At the mini market Rob saw home again in the shape of a sixty-four ounce glass: the big-gulp nation. He tried to get his hand around one of those

enormous glasses. This act of grasping the glass made him think of a photograph his grandfather had shown him of former L.A. Dodger pitching star Sandy Koufax holding four baseballs in his big left hand. I'll need the hands of Koufax to drink in this country, Rob thought.

Back in the car, Rob smiled at the thought that maybe he himself was a valley oak. In school, kids had always teased Rob for his abnormally large earlobes, and like the oaks, he grew up one ridge away from the coast, with the hot dry summers (when the neighbors would take off on vacation and the leave the air-conditioning running) and the cool wet winters (when rain would slam down in tropical downpours and suddenly disappear).

He now knew why he was back home—it was as clear as the Southern California sky. He wanted the familiar things, the connection to the physical earth—the sun, mountains, sea, and desert. He had dreamt of these things in Paris. A quotation from a book on the French Revolution he had picked up at a Left Bank bookstore convinced him it was time to go home. It was from Georges Danton: “You can't take your country with you on the soles of your shoes.”

Rob knew a little about a lot of topics, knowledge garnered mostly on the road—free-lance and on the fly—and a solid general education. After obtaining a business degree from U.C.L.A., he had worked as a stock trader for Banque Paribas in New York and Paris, and as a stringer for a business website in the French capital as well. But now that he was home, he began to wonder whether his worldly experience was a delusion. He had circled the globe and yet knew nothing. He wanted to master something about his own landscape. “You can't take your country with you on the soles of your shoes.”

Arik, in contrast, had mastered the oaks. He studied them constantly, daily. He was exact, observant, and had a prodigious power of memory. Arik's knowledge allowed him to stay aloof. His lone political engagement was to insist that his country project strength throughout the world so that he could live in peace at home. But he had no wider world in which to imagine where and how that muscle

was used.

France had transformed Rob. And Margaux had taught him about love. She had also taught him about oysters. Love and oysters—they go together, they say. But she had taught him about home as well. In her rootedness, in the history of her family on the coast of France, he recognized the importance of home. He was running away from Margaux—he knew it—but he learned from her that running to roots could also feel good. He had told her that at some point he would run back to her. Do people wait for each other?

He told her on their last trip to Brittany, where they had been going regularly to talk to fishermen and factory workers in the oyster business. She translated for him and—truth be told—helped write part of an article they later sold to a magazine back home. The acceptance letter from the editor arrived by e-mail; the check for five hundred dollars arrived by Federal Express. They were on the Breton coast celebrating, nourishing themselves on *fines Bélons* and a good local wine, when he told her he was going back.

Margaux took the news stoically, though her almond eyes drooped and her lips—those full, heart-shaped lips—trembled slightly. Rob saw a question developing on her face, that open, round face with the small, almost pug nose—and all the more cute because of it—and soft curls of brown hair falling onto her forehead:

“Do people part and get back together? Is there such a thing as a second chance?”

It was no surprise there were more questions than answers that night. And now that he was back in L.A., Rob continued to wonder. He had told her not to wait for him, but now he wished he had never said that.

After a few minutes of lecture, Arik was quiet. The radio seemed loud.

Right. And you're gonna tell me that you would let your family die? Just for the sake of some nice little gentlemen's agreement like the Geneva Convention you're not gonna subject someone to torture. This guy has information that will save your wife and kids, and the only way to get it out of the guy is to waterboard him, and you're not going to do it? Yeah, right, the hell you're not.

When they met again last week after Rob's almost ten-year absence, Arik didn't say much. He just nodded an acknowledgement of time gone by and a friendship that hadn't. As classmates in high school they would go on long hikes in the mountains of Southern California. Arik was already awkwardly tall as a teenager, with the kind of height that did not fit his clothes. He didn't yet know the names of the plants, and he would spend a lot of time learning their names, book in hand, stopping to admire witch's broom or wild sage or buttercups and then continuing without comment. And though Rob was more physically fit than Arik, Rob would always let him walk ahead, up the steep canyon trails of whatever cut in the Santa Monica Mountains they were visiting—Laurel, Topanga, Malibu, Decker.

Now they were paired again after years of separation. Rob leaned back into the embrace of interior leather and German engineering. This was L.A. at its best—the comfort of a new car and the security of a full tank of gas. He had forgotten what the smell of new cars and gas stations and freeways was like. His French life was train stations and schedules and clocks. He thought of how he and Margaux used to lean back in their seats on the 7:25 TGV from Montparnasse station to Brittany.

Rob loved the trains of France, and especially the TGV. At almost two hundred miles an hour, it took him from the green rolling fields of the north to the dry hills of olive trees to the south and to the breezy coast to the west. And what he loved most of all—and he could hear it now in his head—was the

recorded female voice—a breathy, airy voice—that preceded every announcement on the public address system at every station in France, a voice singing “ba da DAH da” in a little one-bar ditty that was reminiscent of the first notes of an Enya song. On their last trip they had shoved their suitcases on board just as that tune came over the loudspeaker followed by a recorded female voice announcing the departure, and the door slammed shut behind them as they got on. They had leaned back and smiled at each other and let the stress of ten seconds to spare drain out of them.

He wanted to tell her he was going home immediately after they had sat down on the train that morning. He wasn’t going to wait for a long stretch of beach with the emerald sea shining and the coastal cottages catching the play of the ever-shifting light of Brittany. He wasn’t going to wait for champagne and oysters. But then she took his left hand and entwined her long, delicate fingers with his. And then—that green-eyed gaze of hers. He couldn’t tell her yet, for she had pulled him deep into her world.

That last weekend—now just two weeks ago—was splendid. They worked hard, gathering data on oyster production, interviewing both consumers and producers, locals and tourists. And after three days—three days of love and oysters—they knew they had enough data for Rob to work on the book. Which he would do at home. In Southern California. Where he would write about the symmetrical shape and metallic flavor of *bélons*, the small and delicate green-tinged *marenne*, and the *fines de claire*. One slurp on an oyster at the Santa Monica pier could transport Rob back to France, Brittany, and Margaux. But the car radio brought him to the hear and now.

You’ve heard about tree-sitters and tree-huggers, right? Well, get this. Now we’ve got tree-fornicators. That’s right, folks. I kid you not. They rub themselves up against trees until they have an orgasmic one-with-the-tree experience.

They were now driving at the city limits of L.A. Large houses spread flat to the ground like Army barracks, their perfect green lawns defying the desert climate. Houses marched from the edge of the valley into the hills that spilled into Ventura County. After a ten-minute drive the road suddenly narrowed for a half-mile stretch. The sidewalk disappeared. There were groves of orange, lemon, and grapefruit. Rob could smell them before he saw them. It was a vestige of L.A. he had last seen on photographs, from stories told by his grandfather.

Arik brought the BMW to rest on a gravel parking lot alongside the groves. They got out of the car and walked along a path that led through a stand of orange trees heavy with fruit, to a complex of white-washed Spanish-style structures with red tile roofs, the former residence of a wealthy landowner but now a museum. The path carried them past the buildings along closely cropped hedges, beyond which towered slender eucalyptus and palm trees. They crossed a narrow bridge, under which a trickle of water flowed through a creek, a remnant of Southern California's natural heritage, now bookended by two cement ditches. They followed the path as it curved through a small stand of bamboo and emerged into a grove of lemon trees.

"This is the perfect soil for valley oaks—deep rich bottom land," Arik explained as they walked. His pace was quick. "And the nearby stream provides a constant supply of ground water . . ."

Arik suddenly broke off. And where he had been walking in his characteristic style, head lowered, as if too tall for his personality, he now stood erect, his head even cocked back to take in the view ahead: a solitary oak tree.

Rob stopped, too, and it seemed as if the world took a deep breath as well. The traffic of L.A. retreated to a dim low background. The sun illuminated the tree's upper reach, light filtering through

the oak's massive branches to create patterns on the dusty earth below.

“It’s over eighty feet tall.” Arik spoke slowly now. “About nine feet in circumference. And some six hundred years old.”

But Rob wasn’t hearing anymore. He had left the world of data behind. He approached the tree warily, and it seemed to take a long time to walk from the outer fringe of the great tree’s canopy to its trunk. When he got there, he ran his hands across the thick grayish bark and placed his fingers in its deep fissures. He pressed his chest and face to the tree and stretched his arms as wide as he could, but did not reach even halfway around the tree. He looked up at the dome of sinewy branches and blinked. The tree seemed to sway against the blue California sky. He felt the pulse of the oak and the vibration of its rhythm, a slow dance in his arms. It was a moment out of time—until the chatter in his mind began again. Rob thought of a word: tree-hugger. He smiled and released his hold on the tree. And that thought marked the beginning of time again—of the debates of civil society and the names we give things. The moment of communication with the oak was lost. But then he closed his eyes and saw Margaux’s face, and heard—faintly—the “ba da DAH da” of a woman’s voice far away. He waited for an announcement that the 7:25 TGV for Brittany was about to leave. No announcement came. He embraced the tree again, and there was no sound and no sight, only the intoxicating smell and the exhilarating touch of home.

END of STORY