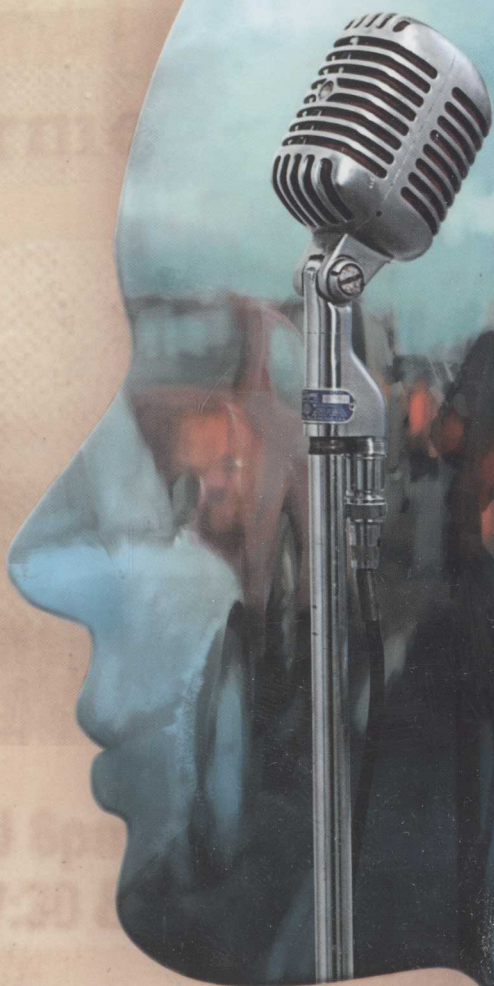
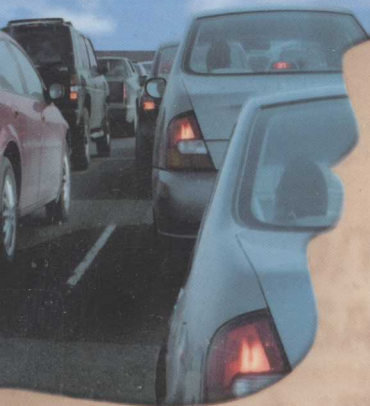


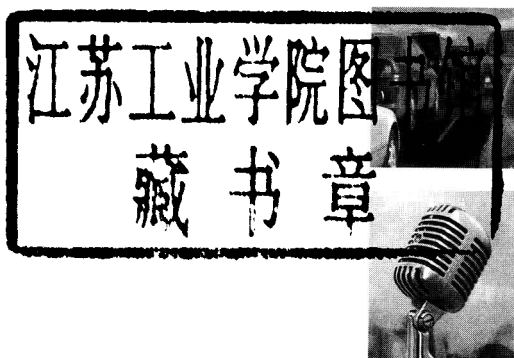
# BREAKOUT



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The car coughed all the way down the freeway entrance, gargled raucously with each change of gear, then shivered like a fever patient when Del tried to take it above sixty. The seat springs were shot, leaving her butt below sea level and her knees in the clouds. The right outside mirror had been lost somewhere on life's journey. The wheels pulled strongly to the left. An otherworldly whine issued from the air vents. The "Service Engine Soon" light flickered on, then went out—a messenger shot in the back. It was an '83 Datsun, born before CD players, power locks, air bags. On the plus side, the worn leather steering-wheel cover felt homey. And the car was hers.

She let out a scream of joy. The mother of two in the Volvo beside her gave her a glance and slid over two lanes. Del could barely believe everything had gone smoothly. In her mind she played the breakout

scene from *Armed and Dangerous*, the old black-and-white prison movie they'd had at the house in Glendale: Mack plumping up the dummy on his bed, Slim lifting the floorboards to reveal the tunnel, then Jake, the leader, checking his watch, nodding to the others, and muttering, "I been waitin' for this a long time." She said the words aloud in his Brooklyn accent, saw him wiping his forehead and spitting on the floor, then gave the car more gas and shouted out his next line: "Let's bust outta this pukehole!" She drew the line out, then uncorked it again even louder, and again, then a fourth time, spraying it like champagne at the cars around her, at the schoolgirls on the overpass, at the man collecting litter, at the yellow city bus, at the beaming couple on the billboard, at the palm trees and the skyscrapers and the hills in the distance—at all of L.A.

It was July and already hot at eight-fifteen. For three days a Santa Ana wind had been blowing, a furnace door left open. The heat turned up the volume on all her feelings: jubilation, fear, and an eerie sense of weightlessness, as if she were an astronaut free-floating in space—one who's just cut her own cord.

She stole a glance at the temperature controls but couldn't find the air-conditioning switch. With her eyes on the road, she sent her right hand clambering blindly over the console like an elephant trunk, starting

the rear wiper, the rear defrost, the warning lights. Then it came to her that the ponytailed seller had grinned when he'd drawled "externally sourced" in reply to her question about A/C. She'd bought his answer without comment at the time. Suddenly, his meaning was clear. She grabbed the wobbly handle and rolled down the window.

"Jerk," she snapped.

Tilting her head, she bathed in the air flow, trying to wash out the knowledge that her inexperience had been so visible. She felt as if she'd walked down Wilshire in her underwear. Could everybody see that she was barely seventeen, desperate, and didn't know brake fluid from fudge syrup? "Farther down the line," she warned the man out loud, her standard karmic threat. Then she remembered. He was part of the past. He'd sold the car to Del. But Del was done with. She was Elena now. Elena Franco.

She needed music, turned on the radio, and hunted for KLOS. A red Miata blared at her. She'd drifted out of her lane. She jumped back to the right, approached the San Diego Freeway, and repeated her route out loud: "Santa Monica Freeway east. Follow signs for *Interstate 10*. Ten all the way to Phoenix. Then north on whatever-it-is." Then she added, "And no mess-ups." Then, "Piece of cake." She felt for the map, making sure it was there on the passenger seat

underneath her stuffed collie. "And Lassie knows the way," she added. Del gave the dog a pat. She imagined herself leaving the gray part of the map and entering the olive, then the dark green, could taste the coolness in the air there, revivifying as a waterfall. She looked at the tree-shaped air freshener, formerly pine-scented, formerly bright green, that had come with the car at no extra charge.

"Gonna take you back home," she promised it. "Back to the mountains."

From out of nowhere, in a split-second shiver, she sensed that her mother was somewhere in L.A. Then the thought was behind her, like a car speeding past.



"Elena?"

"That's me."

"I'm Carla. Here for the interview. Sorry I'm late. I'll be quick."

"That's good, 'cause the curtain goes up in forty-five minutes and I need half an hour all alone first. Hope you don't mind me doing my makeup. What's the name of your paper?"

"Kaleidoscope. Arts and events with a little muckraking on the side. OK if I record us?"

*"Go for it. Just be sure to take the 'ums' out of my quotes. And no fragments or run-ons, you know? Make it read like English. And be sure to describe the dressing room as 'opulent' and crammed with bouquets. Just kidding."*

*"OK. Recording. The play's called Breakout. A one-woman show, written and performed by Elena Franco. And this is the Denver premiere, right?"*

*"Denver, North America, the universe. This is it. All zeroes on the odometer."*

*"Wow. Are you nervous?"*

*"Thanks for reminding me. Of course I'm nervous! I hate rejection, in all its forms. Especially in the form of people not attending my plays, taking phone calls while they're attending my plays, and letting their seats bang when they leave in the middle of my plays."*

*"From what the theater faxed me, the show's about a traffic jam in Los Angeles. Is that where you live?"*

*"I did till high school, but I'm in Boulder now."*

*"How old are you?"*

*"Twenty-five. Could you hand me that mascara?"*

*"How many plays have you written?"*

*"This is number nine. The third one I've gotten produced. Now if I could only get a few reviews."*

*"I'll be doing that."*

*"Cool. And what form of payment do you prefer when being bribed?"*



*"One of those Hershey kisses would probably do the job."*

*"Here, take twenty."*

*"So apparently there's a lot about cars in the play. Are you into cars?"*

*"Into cars? I hate cars. The first one I owned was this ancient Datsun that had an asthma attack every time it went uphill. So of course I took it to the mountains, and I eventually ended up working at this motel in Taos, where of course it died on me in a couple of weeks. My initiation into the wonderful world of automobiles. They're like kids, only more expensive. You gotta bathe 'em and buy 'em stuff and take 'em to the emergency room and worry about people stealing 'em. I've already got a child for all that. A daughter who's my one and only and tells me I'm hers. No car ever said that to me."*

*"Are you married?"*

*"Single. Probably because I'm insanely picky about who I'd let help raise my girl. And I'm probably too much of a control freak for anyone to put up with anyway."*

*"Yeah?"*

*"Yeah. I write all my own copy for theater programs and try to edit everyone else's. I boss the lighting and set people around. I really like getting what I want, you know? When I wanted a baby, I got myself pregnant. With boyfriends, I'm always getting in trouble telling 'em*

*where to park and what to order in restaurants. You're not going to print this, right?"*

*"So are any of the characters in the show based on you?"*

*"Any of 'em? All of 'em!"*

*"It's autobiography?"*

*"It's fiction. Meaning autobiography seen through weird, wavy glass. I mean, I'm not comically helpless like the new father in the show, and I sure don't drive a Lincoln Continental, but I know about trying to mix work and parenting, what it's like when I'm trying to type with one hand and hold a thermometer in my daughter's mouth with the other."*

*"So where did this bunch of characters come from? From a certain time in your life?"*

*"Funny you should ask. I think I'll leave that one alone. What do you think of the earrings? Too big? They look like freaking wind chimes."*

*"I like 'em."*

*"Yeah?"*

*"Yeah."*

*"OK. They're in. Anyway. Back to your question. A partial answer. The play mainly comes from when I was younger. But all that stuff's seen through my eyes now, with everything that's happened since, especially this breakthrough I had a year ago. It's like those paintings*

*Monet did of the same haystack at different times. The hay's yellow in one, then orange, then purple. You keep getting older and changing, and the scenes you look back on change because of that. I was pretty angry and impossible in high school. But in the show there's an argument between a parent and a teenager, and when I was writing it, suddenly it hit me that I was siding with the mother now and making fun of my old impossible self. You can't step into the same river twice. Or the same memory, you know?"*

*"So why a traffic jam? It seems like such a strange subject to pick."*

*"That was part of the lure. A misshapen, unwanted subject that actually had a lot going for it. And in L.A. it's not strange—it's daily life. One summer I was in a killer jam like this one. The kind you never forget. The play's sort of based on that, and on issues from back then that I'm still working on. But altered, disguised, given to different characters. Changed. From life into art. Like in the play, I changed the jam to winter, to keep the drivers in their cars longer, so I could get into their little worlds and build up to the scene when they finally get out and start interacting with each other. That's what writers do."*

*"Do you think you'll ever do the show in L.A.?"*

*"Man, what are you, a massage therapist? You know just where it hurts. Short answer: No. Off-the-record answer, just for you: The things I tell about myself in the show are all true, except that I don't actually have an*

*agent in L.A.—or any agent, period—and I didn't fly out there last year. I've never actually gone back since I left. And never wanted to. So, no. It's not a place I'd be comfortable performing. End of interview, OK? Whew. That got my mind off the jitters. So tell me, was anybody milling around on the sidewalk? The first play I ever did, the theater sat eighty, two people showed up. And they sat on opposite sides. Two bowling pins. I swear I went cross-eyed. One laughed, the other didn't. To bring in a crowd, theaters should hire people to mill around on the sidewalk, don't you think? Like duck decoys. It works with birds, right? Whoa. It's seven-thirty. Get me a copy of the story, OK? Sorry to shoo you out."*

*"Break a leg."*

*"How 'bout 'axle.'"*

*"Cute."*

*"Could you say it? For luck?"*

*"Break an axle."*

*"Thanks."*



Traffic thickened past the San Diego interchange. Cars closed in around Del as if they were all being herded into a pen, other drivers now visible in unasked-for detail. She watched smoke uncoiling like Arabic calligraphy from the cigarette held by the man

in front, and through his windows she looked one car farther, where two unbelted toddlers flailed at each other in Punch and Judy fashion. Del smiled inside, hoarding her secret, savoring how little the others could see of her.

They knew nothing of her long swims behind the waves, the joy of diving into a new medium, becoming a new creature, leaving behind the rules and ranting of Opal Pewitt—a loony from Lubbock and her current foster mother. They were unaware of the string of deposits from her video-store job that had bought her the car. They hadn't seen her park it a half-mile from her house, visiting at night to drop off thrift-shop clothes, groceries, the tent. They would have laughed to see her disguised just an hour before, in baggy sweats and huge sunglasses and floppy hat, walking with a quirky gait picked up from a passerby, unfolding her Little Mermaid towel on the sand at her spot south of Venice Pier, quickly arranging her sandals and sunscreen, discreetly dropping her bathing cap in the water. Then to the gas station bathroom to change clothes and cut off her hair. Then to the car, and onto the freeway.

She flicked the air freshener, sending it spinning, and congratulated herself on her brilliance. If none of her other job ideas panned out, she could always write a book: *Faking Your Own Death for Dummies*.

She took off her cap and felt her head in wonder. Minutes before, her hair had been a steamy, wriggling mass of curls, heavy as an armload of seaweed. Over the years, it had firmly resisted straightening, mousse, braiding, cornrows, and everything L'Oréal could throw at it. Now it was half an inch long. Her head felt light as a balloon. She sat tall, glanced in the mirror, and barely recognized herself. A good sign. She'd work on the uneven patches that night. Maybe she'd actually come to like it. There was nothing like simulating your death to spur action on chronic hair problems. The other advantages over mere running away were just as appealing: No search for her. No being returned to Opal. No being placed with someone else even worse or in some zoo of a group home. An end to the Ferris wheel of social workers, therapists, lawyers, advocates, to assessments and interviews and reports and recommendations. An end to her file—Tolstoy-thick, battered and brown-edged with thumbing. A life without a file, just like other people! No state inspector peering into her tent. No eight other pairs of hands helping her raise it. Not a boring class in Independent Living Skills, like the one she'd just taken, but real independence! Actual living! Why wait another year till graduation? She was ready to start living her life right now. But not a sequel to her old one. A new life. Bare wood. Blank page.

She wondered if her death would be in the news. She wasn't scheduled to show up at work until three, and Opal wouldn't be home before six. If it made the news at all, it wouldn't be for a day. The bathing cap was meant to suggest drowning, but sharks might take the rap. She'd hoped to tiptoe out quietly enough not to wake the media. Then again, reading about your own memorial service would be cool—yet another advantage of faking your death over actually dying. With an industrial-strength disguise, you could even attend it. Del pictured the scene.

"Who's the Eskimo woman in the furs with the caribou-skin sun mask?"

"Said she was one of Del's caseworkers."

She imagined the crowd in the chapel: the few foster parents who hadn't rejoiced to hear she'd died, one or two social workers, her neighbor from the El Monte house. She listened in on their conversations: the Dodgers, traffic, work. Disappointing but probably true. Then she added her chemistry teacher to the scene, Mr. Kielbohn, popularly known as Mr. Carbon. He was wearing his tweed vest and bow tie, the only teacher who'd likely show up. She approached him. Through the mouth slit in her mask she whispered into his ear, "Do not worry. The seal spirit told me she very happy now where she is. Del love water very much."

To which he replied, "Just a *heck* of a substance. Let me show you something about water. . . ."

Del returned to the present and felt suddenly uneasy to realize she was leaving the Pacific behind. It would seem strange not to have that geographical anchor. Or anything else familiar around her. She hated L.A., but it was all she'd known. She'd twice lived within earshot of a freeway and gotten used to falling asleep to the sound. Would they have Winchell's Donuts and California rolls in Arizona? The prospect of so much newness was frightening, the dose too concentrated. A road sign advanced toward her: "Downtown Los Angeles." She had no idea what she'd find on the other side. For an instant, she wished she could turn around, then gripped the wheel tighter and steered toward the east.



*Los Angeles! City of tanned shoulders! Smog-spewing, pay-per-viewing, sitcom maker for the world! Mall builder! Pierced-tongue purveyor of tacos! Surfboard toter, deal closer, looter, shooter, barbecuer, black-jacketed valet parker of a million BMWs! City of thronged roads! Drive-through city! City whose dwellers see the sun through sunroofs, its rays pouring through like revelation*



*and tanning the youthful, muscled, tattooed, sunscreened shoulders of Los Angeles!*

*Probably half the people in this theater moved here from there, right? You know what I'm talking about. L.A. Home of drive-in movies. Also drive-through burgers, bagels, banking, booze. Not to mention drive-in church. And why not? What is sitting in church like? Gridlock, without the bucket seats. In both cases, a good time to clean under your nails. A chance for profound examination of your behavior: "Why didn't I wait until rush hour was over?" Staring at the head in front of you, wondering if she did her hair by sticking it out the window at the car wash. Wondering if God meant you to wear bangs. Wondering when we can all go home.*

*Roads and revelation go together. Saint Paul had his vision on the road to Damascus. Blinded him. Knocked him flat on the ground.*

*Mine came on a road, too, in my twenty-fourth year. In L.A., on the San Diego Freeway. Northbound, near the Mulholland exit. A metaphysical, out-of-body, out-of-automobile experience. A Scenic Vista vision of Los Angeles, of the whole freeway of life.*

*Could we dim the lights just a little? Thanks.*

*Wow. Weird. That's exactly how it started with Saint Paul. He looked up and saw light. A blazing light from heaven. Struck him blind for three days.*