

THE  
HISTORY OF LUMINOUS  
MOTION

A NOVEL BY

SCOTT BRADFIELD

THE  
HISTORY OF  
LUMINOUS  
MOTION

SCOTT BRADFELD

---



*Alfred A. Knopf · New York · 1989*

THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK

PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPF, INC.

Copyright © 1989 by Scott Bradfield

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York. Distributed by Random House, Inc., New York.

Originally published in Great Britain by Bloomsbury Publishing, Ltd.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following for permission to reprint previously published material:

*Island Music Ltd.*: Excerpt from "Many Rivers to Cross" by Jimmy Cliff. Copyright © 1969 by Island Music Ltd. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

*Morley Music Co. and Cahn Music Company*: Excerpt from "It's Been a Long, Long Time" by Jule Styne and Sammy Cahn. Copyright 1945 by Morley Music Co. Copyright renewed 1973 by Morley Music Co. and Cahn Music Company. International copyright secured. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Bradfield, Scott.

The history of luminous motion/Scott Bradfield.—1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-394-57875-9

I. Title.

PR6052.R2515H5 1989

823'.914—dc19

89-2778

CIP

Manufactured in the United States of America

FIRST AMERICAN EDITION

THE  
HISTORY  
OF  
LUMINOUS  
MOTION

***For Felicia***

*This is the long lulled pause  
Before history happens . . .*

—TOM PAULIN

# M O T I O N







# 1

Mom was a world all her own, filled with secret thoughts and motions nobody else could see. With Mom I easily forgot Dad, who became little more than a premonition, a strange weighted tendency rather than a man, as if this was Mom's final retribution, making Dad the future. Mom was always now. Mom was that movement that never ceased. Mom lived in the world with me and nobody else, and every few days or so it seemed she was driving me to more strange new places in our untuned and ominously clattering beige Ford Rambler. It wasn't just motion, either. Mom possessed a certain geographical weight and mass; her motion was itself a place, a voice, a state of repose. No matter where we went we seemed to be where we had been before. We were more than a family, Mom and I. We were a quality of landscape. We were the map's name rather than some encoded or strategic position on it. We were like an MX missile, always moving but always already exactly where

## The History of Luminous Motion

we were supposed to be. There were many times when I thought of Mom and me as a sort of weapon.

“Do you love your mother?” one of Mom’s men asked me. We were sitting at Sambo’s, and I was drinking hot chocolate. Mom had gone to the ladies’ room to freshen up.

It seemed to me a spurious question. There was something sedentary and covert about it, like the bad foundation of some prospective home. I had, as always, one of my school texts open in my lap. It was entitled *Our Biological Wonderland: 5th Edition*, and I was contemplating the glossary to Chapter Three. I liked the word “Chemotropism: Movement or growth of an organism, esp. a plant, in response to chemical stimuli.” Chemotropic, I thought. Chemotropismal.

“Your mother is a very nice person,” the man continued. He didn’t like the silence sitting between us there at the table. I myself didn’t mind. He smoked an endless succession of Marlboros, which he crushed out in his coffee saucer rather than the Sambo’s glass ashtray resting conveniently beside his elbow. Nervously he was always glancing over his shoulder to see if Mom was back yet. I didn’t tell him Mom could spend ages in the ladies’ room; the ladies’ room was one of Mom’s special places. No matter where we were living or where we were traveling, Mom found a sort of uniform and patient atmosphere in the ladies’ rooms where she went to make herself beautiful. Sometimes, when I accompanied her there like a privileged and confidential adviser, we would sit in front of the mirror for hours while

she tried on different lipsticks and eye shadows, mascaras and blushes. Mom found silence in the ladies' room, and in the beauty of her own face. It was like the silence that sat at the tables between me and Mom's men, only by Mom and me it was more appreciated, and thus more profound.

"I love my mom," I said, holding the book open in my lap. Mom's man wasn't looking at me, though. He seemed to be thinking about something. It was as if the silence had actually moved into him too, something he had inherited from the still circulating memory of Mom's skin and Mom's scent. I looked into my book again, and we sat together drinking our coffee and hot chocolate, awaiting that elimination of our secret privacy which Mom carried around with her like a brilliant torch, or a large packet of money. Sometimes I felt as if I were a million years old that summer, and that Mom and I would continue traveling like that forever and ever, always together and never apart. I remember it as the summer of my millionth year, and I suspect I will always remember that summer very well.

Those were nights when we moved quickly, the nights when Mom found her men. Usually I would lie in the backseat of our car and read my faded textbooks, acquired from the moldering dime bargain boxes of surfeited and dusty used-book stores. I would read by means of the diffuse light of streetlamps, or the fluid and Dopplering light of passing automobiles. Sometimes I had to pause in the middle of paragraphs and sentences in order to await this sentient light. In those days I thought light was layered and textured like

## The History of Luminous Motion

leaves in a tree. It moved and ruffled through the car. It felt gentle and imminent like snow. Eventually I would fall asleep, the light moving across and around me on some dark anonymous street, and I would hear the car door open and slam and Mom starting the ignition, and then we would be moving again, moving together into the light of cities and stars, Mom pulling her coat over me and whispering, "We'll have our own house someday, baby. Our own bedrooms, kitchen and TV, our own walls and ceilings and doors. We'll have a brand-new station wagon with a nice soft mattress in back so you can lie down and take a nap any time you want. We'll have a big yard and garden. We might even have a second house. In the mountains somewhere."

In the mornings I would awake in different cities, underneath different stars. Only they were the same cities, too, in a way. They were still the same stars.

Mom kept the credit cards in a plastic card file in the glove compartment, even the very old cards that we never used anymore. The file box also contained a few jeweled rings and gold bands which we sold sometimes at central city pawnshops, and a few random business cards with phone numbers and street maps urgently scrawled on their backs. These were the maps of Mom's men, and sometimes I preferred looking at them rather than at my own textbooks. These were names of things, people and places that possessed color, suspense and uniformity, like a globe of the world with textured mountain ranges on it. Lompoc, Burlingame, Half Moon Bay, Buellton, Stockton, Sacramento,

Davis, San Luis Obispo. Real Estate, Plumbing, Fire Theft Auto, 24 Hour Bail, Good Used Cars, Cala Foods and Day-brite Cleaners. Mom's men were accumulations of words, like nails in a piece of wood. When I closed the plastic file again the lid's plastic clamp clacked hollowly. "That's Mom's Domesday Book you've got there," Mom said. "Her Dead Sea Scrolls, her *tabula fabula*. That's Mom's articulate past, borrowed and bought and certainly very blue. If they ever catch up with your old mom, you take that file box and toss it in the river—that is, if you can find a river. Head for the hills, and I'll get back to you in five to ten, though I'm afraid that's just a rough estimate. I've stopped keeping track of the felonies. I think that's the compensation that comes with age—not wisdom. You're allowed to stop keeping track of the felonies." Mom was wearing bright red lipstick, tight faded Levi's and a yellow blouse. She drank from a can of Budweiser braced between her knees. I didn't think Mom was old at all. I thought she was exceptionally young and beautiful.

Outside our dusty car windows lay the flat beating red plains of the San Fernando Valley. Dull gray metal water towers, red-and-white-striped radio transmitters, cows. "Emily Dickinson said she could find the entire universe in her backyard," Mom told me. "This, you see, is our backyard." Mom gestured at the orange groves and dilapidated, sunstruck fresh-fruit stands and fast-food restaurants aisling us along Highway 101. The freeway asphalt was cracked and pale, littered with refuse and the ruptured shells of overheated retread tires. Then Mom would light her cigarette

## The History of Luminous Motion

with the dashboard lighter. I liked the way the lighter heated there silently for a while like some percolating threat and then, with a broken clinking sound, came suddenly unsprung. Mom's waiting hand would catch it—otherwise it would project itself onto the vinyl seat and add more charred streaks to the ones it had already made. There was even a telltale oval smudge against the inside thigh of Mom's faded Levi's. "Now, keep your eyes out for the Gilroy off-ramp," Mom said. "It's along here somewhere. We'll have a McDonaldburger and then I know this bar where maybe I'll get lucky. Maybe we'll both get lucky." And of course we always did.

## 2

Because I always identified Mom according to her customary and implicit movement, whenever that movement ceased or diminished it seemed to me as if Mom's meaning had lapsed too. It was her wordlessness I recognized first, that pulse and breath of her steady and unflagging voice. It was a soundlessness filled with noise, a meaninglessness filled with words. It was like that intensification of language where language is itself obliterated, as if someone had typed a thousand sentences across the same line of gleaming white bond until nothing remained but a black mottled streak of carbon.

"This is Pedro," she told me that long ceremonious day in San Luis Obispo. We had been staying the week at a Travelodge on Los Osos Boulevard, thanks to the uncomprehending beneficence of Randall T. Philburn, a ranch supplies salesman Mom had met in a King City Bingo Parlor the week before. Randall had carried Diner's Club and American Express. He had shown me a trick with two pieces

## The History of Luminous Motion

of string. The next time I saw him, I was supposed to have memorized the names and chronologies of all our presidents.

“And this, Pedro, this is the only important man in my life,” Mom said. “My unillustrious and laconic son, Phillip.”

So that was how it began. She told me his name was Pedro, as if all her men had names. Pedro. As if a man's name were something to be uttered and not a bit of embossed plastic to be stored in a grimy beige plastic file box in our Rambler's rattly glove compartment. Pedro. As if I were supposed to remember. As if a man's name was something you said with your mouth so that another's ears might hear.

It was no simpler than that, that first staggering cessation of Mom's body and her voice. Barely an utterance and more than a name. Pedro. And it wasn't even his name, really.

“How you doing, sport?” Pedro asked, teaching me a firm handshake. His real name was Bernie Robertson, and Bernie possessed a round florid face (particularly after his second or third Budweiser), a hardware store in Shell Beach, a slight paunch, and a two-bedroom house in the Lakewood district of San Luis Obispo, where I was allowed the dubious privacy of my own room. It was only a week after our first, formal introduction that Bernie helped us transfer our few things from the Travelodge into his home where Pedro's real, unvoiced name was everywhere. It was on the mail and on the automobile registration and on the towels and on the hearth rug, it was on the mortgage and the deed. It was



even burned into a crosscut oak placard which hung from Pedro's front porch: THE ROBERTSONS. It was a name which, unless we were very careful, might very soon attach itself to both Mom and me.

"My house is your house," Pedro liked to say, sitting on the sofa with his arm around Mom, his can of Bud balanced on his right knee. Pedro's house contained stuffed Victorian love seats, knickknack shelves, porcelain statues of Restoration ladies and gentlemen engaged in rondels and courtly kisses, untried issues of *Reader's Digest* and *The Saturday Evening Post*, lace doilies and even antimacassars. Mom lay with Pedro on one sofa, her head in his lap, his arm across her breast. I sat alone on the love seat with my textbook. It was entitled *Science and Our World Around Us*, and contained a color photograph of *E. coli*. Most human beings and animals contained this bacterium in their intestines, the photo caption said, and though generally benign, it could cause infant diarrhea and food poisoning. Mom and Pedro seemed very happy and warm there in front of the fire. The television was on, generating its soft noise. One slice of dry pizza remained in the oily cardboard container beside the blazing brick fireplace where Heidi, Pedro's smug and disaffected gray cat, paused occasionally in its rounds to lick at it. Sometimes I just read the dictionary. Auto-da-fé, autodidact, autoecious, autogamy, autoimmune. Words in a dictionary have a rhythm to them, a dry easy meaning I can assemble in my head like songs, or caress like pieces of sculpted wood. Autoecious, I thought. Autogamy. Autoimmune.