

*Alamogordo*

Published in the *Breakwater Review*, 2016

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1983

The earth jerked as the F-15s left base and headed east that summer. It could have been Kara's father or mine in any one of those machines. A pinging blossomed in our eardrums as the jets broke the sound barrier. Kara didn't flinch. She never did. I reminded her that sometimes things fall from the sky and kill you, even your dad. Kara said *bullshit*, gape mouthed, her front teeth jagged as the San Andres Mountains lining the distance.

We lived at the thinnest point of a thinning highway beyond a standard military base checkpoint, in our standard military base duplexes. The days were always too bright and the nights a flat purple. I spent my days with Kara that year. At night I stared up from among the sleeping, the TV buzzing, knowing that any one of the stars out the window could have been a bomb on its way.

On *The New Twilight Zone* a frazzled housewife named Penny found a relic in her basement and by carrying it in her pocket could make the world freeze just by saying *shut up*. She found quiet by freezing and unfreezing the world on command. But then as night came, those steely stars in her sky became nuclear weapons, just short of landing on earth. Penny yelled *shut up*, freezing the weapons above her head, freezing the world just before impact. It's what television I can recall from that year.

We waited for the F-15s to come home, lying on our backs in a brown field. I'd say something and Kara would say *bullshit*. Then I'd tell her to shut up and she wouldn't freeze.

Kara knew I couldn't freeze her or the world with words. She'd already learned that if you say *shut up*, or if you say anything, horror can still drop *easy*, smashing your heart before you realize what's happened. Like a year earlier—just before I moved to Alamogordo—when Kara's little brother was hit by a car so hard his shoes were found in two different trees. Nothing she said stopped it and now everything was *bullshit* and she never flinched.

When the days felt too bright to take, we wrote letters to the Soviet Union. Sitting at a card table stashed in my walk-in pantry, we scrolled our bubbly blue cursive on yellow legal paper, requesting the nature of war be broken down simple. We demanded the *yes* and the *no* only. Like when Samantha Smith read her letter on *The Johnny Carson Show*, we wrote: *Are you going to vote to have a war or not?* We wrote until my mother returned from work and kicked us back toward the bright, bright world.

Samantha Smith. We liked her because she was our age. We liked her because she had straight teeth and a big smile. The letters she'd sent the USSR that year had been published in the Soviet *Pravda*. They placed her smiling face on a stamp, claiming her as their ambassador of peace, flew her to their country and wrapped a navy babushka over her small head. They aired it on the ABC evening news.

Kara and I wrote letters that never made it past the kitchen. We lacked sufficient addresses and carry through. We'd never have our face on a stamp. I knew things could fall from the sky and kill you and so did Samantha Smith. At least I had that. I shared a knowing with Samantha Smith.

When the F-15s came back late that summer Kara and I were walking the thinnest stretch of the highway. The earth jerked and then they came, descending fast, trailing white smoke almost low enough to touch. The pinging blossomed in our eardrums. I flinched, waited for the mountains to fall over, for the earth under us to break into chunks and slip us under its dark gashes. Nothing happened.

I ran home and waited on the front steps for my father. The last traces of white jet smoke were dissipating, leaving just the brightness. The brightness eventually shifted to a flat purple. I continued waiting. Any number of the stars emerging could have been anything. Then there he was.

1984

Kara's father got redeployed. When we said goodbye outside her duplex, she dug a glass coke bottle with a faded logo out of the sand, held it up and let the earth slowly fall as she

twirled up the driveway singing Little Orphan Annie's "The Sun Will Come Out Tomorrow." She flung the bottle toward some shrubs clustered at the yard's edge and gave a final wave, climbing into the Dodge Caravan.

The F-15s and my father took off again that fall but I stopped staring at the sky as much. In my head I still braced for fire to rain down. At night, instead of fixating on stars, I learned to sleep through the night. I could remain under the crinkled sheets even during the day's brightest hours. When awake, I walked along the bright roads and hunted for relics that might have slipped into cracks or behind rocks, thinking something magical could always flash itself up at me. Something I'd keep in my pocket, freezing the world with when the time was right. I never found much of anything.

More and more, when the F-15s returned, I failed to see them coming, failed to see the white smoke trail over my head. I'd only know my father was back when I heard his voice emerge somewhere in the house.

Katie, Melissa and most of all Janelle eventually replaced Kara that year. Janelle, a couple years older and a year behind in school, hadn't lived in Alamogordo long, but quickly found distant points of the thinning highway beyond anything I knew was there—thin points twinkling with liquor stores and Chinese restaurants. We lingered with Slurpees at the edges of parking lots and buildings. Sometimes Janelle slipped behind the 7-11 with Javier, who worked the register. *Wait*, she would say to me, handing me her Slurpee and following Javier to the other side of the green dumpsters. I waited sometimes, but more often I turned and walked home, looking downward the whole way.

1985

They cast Samantha Smith as the spirited daughter of a horse farming insurance detective played by Robert Wagner in the new TV series *Lime Street*. She'd filmed four and a half episodes in Burbank California, and then headed home to Maine with her father. Flying through dense rain and darkness, the plane drifted off course, descended at the wrong time, tilted too many degrees and smashed into trees edging the runway.

*Lime Street* had yet to debut, but when it did, in that fifth episode, Samantha Smith disappears from the script around the half-hour mark. In episodes to follow, she's only absent, no context for her omission offered.

The third and last time Kara and I spoke by phone was during the closing credits of that fifth episode. When I asked if she heard about Samantha Smith, she said she'd just gotten braces and they ate her cheeks raw. That morning she'd found streaks of blood on her pillow. *Bloody mouth slug trails* she called them. *I'm sorry* I replied. Then she said something about a canoe trip. Just before we hung up she said, *Samantha Smith—yeah, I'm sorry, too. Shit happens.*

By the end of that year, I'd started looking neither up nor down, just straight ahead. I'd stare straight into the mirror and focus on my face—count the black pores that crossed from the bridge of my nose, deepening toward my oily cheeks. I'd turn from the mirror to the world and wait to see what would cross my path, anticipating that anything could crush my line of vision, knowing that at any edge a fire could curl up. Out in the bright day, looking straight ahead, I learned that the highway never actually thinned away altogether, just split the mountains and kept going. I walked past the liquor stores, the Chinese restaurants, the 7-11, toward the jagged San Andres mountains. I walked and waited for something to cross my path or fall into it.

On one of those days I found my father. Wearing his BDU fatigues, he crossed the parking lot of a lounge bar and carried a six-pack of Coors. He saw me before I saw him, approached with lips pressed tight, nodded his head toward his truck, said nothing. I didn't know the F-15s had returned.

My father drove me to the landing strip. It was the only time I saw his F-15 up close. As he helped me up into the cockpit's front seat, I smelled the beer on him. *Here she is*, he said with a sigh.

Sitting in the narrow seat, I looked ahead at the console. The black dials and knobs looked delicate enough to snap off if I'd swept my hand hard enough across the dashboard. I wondered how many people around the world had looked up and saw my father in there,

flinching as he passed by at 600 miles an hour. I wanted to ask if he had ever killed anyone, if he ever dropped a bomb. *Looks like a toy*, I said.

He leaned away and paced along the side of the jet for a minute, took a bottle of Coors from his fatigues pants pocket and smashed it against the wing. *We're moving to Germany. I need glasses*. When I asked him to explain what he meant, he leaned down silently and began picking up the shards of glass from the tarmac.

My father had always ignored my questions about what it was like to fly. Once, years earlier, I had asked him what it felt like to break the sound barrier, to explain that pinging that blossoms in your ear and the white smoke fanning around the jet at that moment. *When you break it what happens to you up there?* He said it wasn't that exciting. It feels like nothing. A flight suit designed to keep the blood from rushing away from your head contains you. Tilting up or down, the flight suit just gets tighter. *Life's more exciting down here, when your blood is allowed to rush around*, he said. I never believed he meant that, but I believe he thought he was saying the right thing.

1986

When we flew to Germany, flying fast and far away from Alamogordo—its highways and mountains, its liquor stores, its Chinese restaurants and 7-11, everything hidden in its cracks—I flinched on take off and landing. And in those hours between, trailing white smoke over a dark ocean, I mostly looked ahead and thought about Samantha Smith. I wondered if she looked out her plane's window and saw the rain through the darkness. When she began to move off course, tilt too many degrees, when she headed toward the trees, what did she know?