



MORGAN TYREE

The Fine Art Of Quitting

POE BALLANTINE

for Gen Tsaconas

To see what is right, and not do it, is want of courage, or of principle.

— Confucius

I live beachside in San Diego, California, in a small ground-floor studio with a fold-out couch, a burned-out RCA color television, an eight-by-four kitchen stocked with miniature appliances, and my Toulouse-Lautrec lithos tacked to the walls. I have surrounded myself with philosophical

texts — *Critique of Pure Reason*, *The World as Will and Idea*, *The Republic* (both translations) — even though I have no idea what Kant, Schopenhauer, Plato, and the rest are talking about. Eight years ago, in high school, I wrote an ending to an unfinished novel by Mark Twain called *Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer among the Indians*, and my instructor, Mrs. Ramsey, was so impressed that she thought I should make an appearance on television and claim to be Twain's ghost. Her praise was enough to hatch the notion that I am a writer, but so far

I have not been able to duplicate that early success. In the interim I work as a prep cook at a famous bayside resort and jazz club. (I've never seen so many roaches in a kitchen; now and then you'll catch them carrying off whole hams.) This is my sixteenth job in the last eight years.

I love living at the beach. My rent is double the monthly mortgage on my parents' four-bedroom house fifteen miles inland, but they don't have a billion acres of sparkling green sea for a front yard. I swim out to the buoy every few days, ride the wild surf, dig for clams in the late summer, read the *New Yorker* on the sea wall, and take long, late-night Pacific Ocean walks. You can really think down along the cool, misty shore: hands in your pockets, moon shivering, bonfires crackling, glistening green-black waves smoothing themselves rhythmically upon the footprinted sand — drunk girl with no bra tripping over a piece of driftwood and clanging unceremoniously into a trash can, someone smashing a beer bottle on the boardwalk.

I also love the sanctuary of my dinky beach pad: listening to baseball games on the radio; sitting with a mug of tea and brandy at my midget kitchen table (with its view of the corner pay phone); reading *Nicomachean Ethics* (can anyone tell me what Aristotle is talking about?); crafting my latest novel (I'm already on chapter one!); or writing long letters to my girlfriend in Barcelona, who's busy sleeping her way across Spain. I can't wait for her to come home so we can . . . what? "I'm so happy you said we could see other people," she told me before she left. Did I say that?

On Mission Beach there's always a party with clanking bottles and tittering girls, even in the winter. The rich students from San Diego State University rent apartments here. The couple upstairs fucking sounds like the call of friendly raccoons. Ted and Darlene from Iowa are on their honeymoon, skipping hand in hand, a bit crooked, their flip-flops clapping on the asphalt. ("Why don't we move here, darling? San Diego is so *beautiful*.") The cadaver-faced, belly-scarred welfare mother stops by in the evenings to sit cross-legged on my floor, smoke her Slims, and wait for me to make my move. A couple of marines with a six-pack show up and want to drink with me, as if I were some prop in a California fairy tale. Perfect strangers knock on my door at all hours and ask if I know where the party is, or whether I have change for the pay phone. (Did you do this back in Illinois — knock on people's doors and ask them for change?)

My old friends from way back, the ones who'd never visit me if I lived inland, pull up in front of my apartment and unload the deck chairs and the cooler; the blanket and the umbrella; the frisbee, the surfboards, and the tape deck. My place is Margaritaville with free parking. Always we drink, smoke, or snort something. They stay late and leave me half baked and all alone in the tingling night, listening to the rodent-squeak of mattress springs upstairs.

My party pad was *supposed* to be a writer's studio, but I don't seem to be getting much of that done these days. I tell myself I haven't yet begun. I'm only twenty-five years old. Most authors do their best work between the ages of thirty-two and

thirty-six. These are the indispensable "lost years," I tell myself. I am being shaped by experience. I am Dylan Thomas at the urinal, John Steinbeck drunk on cheap Chianti, Jack London swacked on horseback, Richard Brautigan descending well liquored into the high tide of tie-dyed San Franciscans, absinthe-addled Verlaine with his derringer waiting for Rimbaud to come home. I believe I am dissolute because I am an artist and the pain of Truth is too difficult to bear sober. Greatness is in me like peanuts in a PayDay bar. Earnestly and glowingly inebriated at two o'clock in the morning, I tell anyone who will listen that I am going to win the Nobel prize in literature one day. All I need is something to write about.

(end of excerpt)