

This collection is a fictional representation of rural Northeastern Californians and their existential struggles. The characters range from inarticulate, vulgar thugs to expressive, bitter geniuses; some rise above their conditions while others succumb, but all seek our attention, and respect.

Voices of a City of Gold: Stories from Oroville, California

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**Voices of a City of Gold:
Stories from Oroville, California**

Leslie Hale Roberts

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Too good for her

The buck-toothed, pimped boy sat at the edge of a white plastic chair in the very center of the party, sulking. His legs were splayed out and his chin bent to the floor, ignoring the pretty girl who hovered above him. She was knock-out pretty, too, small features, eyes that just blazed and jet-black hair swishing back and forth whenever she moved. Hard to take your eyes off her.

She'd been waiting for him to look at her or do or say something, something happy so they could get back to feeling good, like before. That man hadn't meant anything by it, just that she was pretty and what was wrong with that?

"Ain't I pretty? You used to always say so yourself. Come on, Ronnie, let's not waste the night like last time, ok? Why don't we go dance?"

But the boy just sat there, staring at the floor. Every so often he looked to make sure she was where she was supposed to be. He wouldn't let her see him, though, that's bullshit. 'Course she was pretty, not the point; the man had no right to say anything, and besides, why was she letting him say anything anyway, was she trying to get his attention? And right there in front of him?

The more he thought about it, the more he got to boiling. Yeah, he'd been stupid and trusting, and she'd been flirting. She must have been doing it, why else would the man come up and say what he did? And what was all this standing over him and waiting shit, waiting for what, for him to forgive her? Fuck that, party's over, never any fun to begin with but now, definitely over and he probably should get up and leave her there, let her go off with him -or whoever- didn't matter anyway, if she was going to flirt with everybody.

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The girl reached for his hand and put his fingers in hers, but he pulled away.

“Damn it, Ronnie, what’s wrong with you?”

Silence.

At last she turned and walked to where several friends sat, friends she’d been dying to talk with but for fear of upsetting him. If he was going to be like this, what else could she do, sit there and let him ruin another party? She’d already wasted half the night with this mood of his, and how often did they get to go to parties anyway? He never took her anywhere, too many nights just the two of them in her room watching TV and all he’d want was for her to put her mouth there, that’s all he wanted anymore and what fun is that, doing the same thing all the time? And she always had to do everything for him, but still he was always so moody and it was hard to understand why he got like that; anybody would eventually give up and want to go have a little fun, right?

Her friends had carefully left her alone all evening, since everybody knew the way he was, but when she made her way towards their table, they erupted in cheers and swarmed around her; a joke, a laugh, and god, it felt good to finally laugh again with your friends, friends who don’t always make scenes and play stupid, possessive games. Sure she loved him and wanted to be with him forever, but you can’t be blamed for wanting to have some fun and get away from feeling down all the time, can you?

Ronnie was aware of everything going on where she was sitting. If he just lifted his head, he could see her there -why was she all laughing, anyway, why was she suddenly so happy?- but he couldn’t look for very long. Pissed you off to see that shit. Hard to ignore your girlfriend acting like some slut.

A friend came to stand next to him. “You ok? Why ain’t you dancin’? Where is she?”

He pointed a finger. “Over there, all fuckin’ happy and shit.” He hunkered low in his chair, finger still aimed in her direction. Let her laugh, let her play, it don’t matter and who fucking wants her anyway, flirting with half the town.

“Fuck it,” he breathed. He wanted to say something more but

then again, he didn't really feel like saying anything. Fuck words...

Then another boy, Preston the football star, came walking slowly towards the table where she sat, his eyes trained on her. Ronnie burned. Preston; what the fuck's she doing, leading him on, him of all people? Bad enough them older guys're all over her, coming around and picking up on her, but now fucking Preston?

"You see who she's talkin' with? You see that shit?" his friend Marty asked.

"...Yep." Ronnie's voice was a bare whisper.

Marty slowly shook his head, arms crossed over his chest. "That's totally fucked up, man."

Ronnie took forever to reply. "Yep," he breathed at last, hands now covering his mouth as if in prayer.

Marty couldn't contain himself. "Fuckin' slut, you should've never trusted her, man, ever. Should've fuckin' broke up the last time."

"...I don't know," Ronnie said, rubbing his forehead with both hands.

Marty could easily imagine what Ronnie was feeling, but waiting for him to react or get pissed or do something was driving him nuts. Finally, he slapped Ronnie on the shoulder. "You just gonna sit there or what?"

"What am I supposed to fuckin' do, go kick his ass?"

"Well, I would..." Marty threw a punch into the air. "Fuckin' Preston, man, that's so lame."

Ronnie looked up at Marty. They'd known each other, what, since kindergarten? Best friends, sure. "Don't call her a fuckin' slut, alright?"

Marty knew it was time to back off. "Yeah, sure, whatever," he said with a wave, heading back into the crowd. "Later."

"Just don't say shit," Ronnie called out before turning again to glare at her.

She looked up with a laugh at something Preston had said, the girl next to her whispering in her ear. Preston held out a hand, kept it in mid-air while she turned and leaned into her friend, a conference, a look in Ronnie's direction, then, nervous, excited -felt

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good to be noticed again, and by a boy like Preston, too- she took his hand and stood and as they walked to the dance floor, all eyes upon her, especially his, she felt her fears give way and suddenly everything else just...didn't matter. No, why not? Why not dance and have fun for a change, what harm is there in that and if he was going to be such a grouch, why should she not have any fun? It was just a dance anyway. Didn't mean anything.

But to Ronnie it damn well did. They'd been on the floor barely two minutes, spinning together, close, she was beginning to feel like herself again, the fun, happy person she liked to be, when Ronnie came up from behind and, with an arm around Preston's neck, flung the larger boy to the floor.

Everything at once erupted around them, music loud and pumping, both boys, a twisted mass of arms and fists. Quickly they were pulled apart, Ronnie dragged from the floor and pushed outside, Preston shouting above the noise, "Fuckin' asshole, I'm gonna crush you!" and there she was, surrounded by friends, in tears.

Cold, black air, loud voices pounding at his mind, large hands on his shoulders.

"Fuckin' knock it off!"

"You ain't goin' back in there, so chill out!"

"Bullshit!"

"Bullshit, you're just gonna fuck it up for everybody!"

"But she's dancin' with that fuckin'/"

"It don't matter who she's dancin' with, you can't just go fuck up a guy for just wantin' to dance with her!"

"She's got a right," said one older guy. "She can have as much fun as anybody else, Ronnie, shit, it's just a dance!"

"But she's...flirtin' around right in front of me, what am I supposed to do?"

"She ain't doin' nothin' wrong, you're just bein' a jealous prick!"

"...I'm goin' back in..."

"You're stayin' outside for awhile and coolin' off, then later you're gonna go back in and apologize."

"I ain't fuckin' gonna apologize to no fuckin' Preston!"

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“You fuckin’ hell are!” The older guy got right in Ronnie’s face. “You ain’t goin’ back inside right now and that’s a promise!”

Large hands yanked him backwards onto the hood of a car, a cold beer shoved into his hand, “Pound it!” then a second, a third, everything building inside, burning, every word of advice making it worse. His mind filled with possibilities, what he was certain now was going on inside the hall, the two of them, him and her, or maybe even...shit, who knows? He ached, tormenting himself with his imagination. He had to do something but, what? He couldn’t go back inside and yet he was dying to find out what was going on.

But then again -the beer filling him now with that good sensation- maybe he really didn’t want to. Yeah, just to spite her, make her start thinking about him for a change instead of always her; maybe she needed that. One of the guys sitting on the car with him even said so and it was true, he probably was too good for her and she didn’t appreciate what she had, hell, yeah. Probably needed some time to miss him, too, maybe start valuing him a lot more than she did.

The beers got better and better and what the hell had he been so moody and depressed about, anyway? She needed him a lot more than he needed her, for sure; why get all worried about it? No sense making yourself feel all bad over a girl, especially one that doesn’t know what she’s got. Makes a lot of sense, made him feel better and the beers kept getting better and better and hell, plenty of fish in the fucking pond where that one came from, what the fuck you worried about? Geez, couple hours outside with the guys, nothing finer, nothing to get all...

~

His peace evaporated about 1 o’clock. Leaning against the windshield, feeling good again and enjoying the company of his friends (friends never let you down, there when you need ‘em, for sure, and sometimes a girl can make you forget about even your best friends, and that’s totally wrong, never again, man, ever!) he saw first her, his girl, stepping out of the doorway and looking around, then, dragging her hand behind her as if towing something, came the figure of the man who’d flattered her earlier. He was much older

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than they were, probably late Twenties, or worse, and with a mustache, too, and that look, that fucking way he's looking at her, and they're just standing there in the doorway, pretending that they weren't holding hands, Jesus Christ, already holding hands with some older fuck and they hadn't even broken up yet or nothing, nothin' had even happened and she's already with somebody else?

Shit...

"That ain't fuckin' Preston, man."

"Yeah, I fuckin' know."

They watched in disbelief, his friends, careful not to be too harsh but, at the same time, harsh enough to register pity for him and disgust with her, chattering and quietly insulting her. Drunk, heart-soaked and heavy, a syrup of pain poured over and into every part of him, Ronnie dropped from the car to his feet, watching the two of them, maybe thirty yards away and surrounded by other couples and small groups talking and laughing. She kept looking out at the night, probably hoping he wouldn't see her, but he had and now -the slut- he didn't care, she could do what she wanted anyway, and first chance he got, he'd pick up on one of her friends and fuck the lights out of her, why not? That's what she was probably going to do with that older guy anyway, probably let him...let him put his hands all over her and...and maybe he'd even make her...

A powerful flame coursed through him, stronger, more irresistible than when he'd grabbed Preston. His mind swam in filthy images, heart flushed with rage as he saw, in his mind, his girl with her mouth opening towards the crotch of this fucking old stranger, some guy taking what was his, his! Ronnie watched them, hand in hand, walking towards the parking lot, sure to be on their way to some isolated spot, or maybe the old fucker's house, where he'd probably...shit, he'd start...

The image rocked him, a wail coming up from within. He took a couple steps, but his friends stood in the way.

"Forget it, leave her alone," the older guy said, "it ain't worth it."

"Yeah, let her go, man," Marty chimed in, "just dump the slut once and for all, alright? and quit all this/

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At the word 'slut', something busted within him. Ronnie suddenly turned and swung out with a tight fist, catching his best friend on the side of the face, the two of them tumbling and rolling upon one another. He wasn't sure how many times he hit him but it was many and the sonofabitch should've never called her a slut, didn't matter why, it wasn't his right.

The fight lasted all of a minute but there had been blood from both and each had torn clothing and made a real mess of themselves. And being drunk only made him feel worse, especially -once he'd calmed down and started thinking straight again- after he realized he'd tried to beat the shit out of his best friend. Cooler heads had split them apart and insisted they make up right then. Soon they embraced, even shared a laugh and found themselves arm over arm, surrounded on either side by friends, everybody heading back to the cars, where there was still plenty of beer and it was cold and the night, why, they still had all night and they were friends, best of friends, forever, and sometimes even friends took to beating the shit out of each other; maybe sometimes you have to, if the situation calls for it, right? No harm, no foul.

He'd just finished his second beer after the fight -long, full gulps; almost threw the can at Preston when he walked by but, with everybody around him, forced himself not to- and he'd just opened his third when the thought came to him that it had been her, with that older guy -fucking prick!- who'd caused the whole thing, no one else, not his friend. She was the cause of it, but you don't let a girl get in the way of your friendships, geez, it just ain't right. Pissed you off.

He looked around the parking lot, only a few cars remaining and a few couples standing about in the shadowy light, but as he scanned for her, remembering now where his mind had been right before the fight, it occurred to him at last that she was not there.

~ ~

Crazy Birds

Even though it's just a long row of buildings that all look the same, everybody's satellite dish pointing the same direction, there's something beautiful when the sun comes out after a lot of clouds, especially when it's windy and the smoke goes away. When the sun isn't out, there are no shadows and everything looks flat like a postcard, but when it's shining, it's like TV, more real. It's better when it's out, you feel more like you're alive instead of all gray and inside all the time. Inside isn't bad all the time, just when the sun isn't shining, it can be bad.

That one building, the one right in front, always looks best. There's a lot of mold growing in the cracks and along the edges of the tiles and it looks like the building's been crying, the way it grows down like a green, still waterfall. It's pretty when the sun hits it. Sometimes the women hang their laundry on top and it looks like dancing ghosts having fun and you can stare at them a long time.

It's hard when all you have to do is sit and watch things, but on the good days, when the sun is out, it isn't so hard.

Some people have balconies they sit on and look out at the parts of the town they can see, but you don't see a lot of people out there during the day, only usually at night, although sometimes you can see somebody come out and look around and maybe smoke or drink something; they never stay very long but they should, especially when the sun shines and it's so beautiful. People should stay longer in the sunshine.

The best part is when the crazy birds, the little ones, come darting and weaving close to the window. They want to see in as much as a person wants to see out! Well, maybe not, but they always come so close and they seem to be having so much fun. Maybe it's

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just they like to fly so much and the buildings are the best place they can do it, or maybe they're the only place. It's hard to know for sure.

One time not too long ago a person came out on the top of the building across from this one and everybody got all excited, you could see them trying to get her to come back but she wouldn't, she kept standing on that ledge so they brought up a doctor -well, it was probably a doctor, though he looked different from the ones who come here- and he talked to her to come down but she wouldn't and she kept standing out there the whole night. You could tell everyone was all worried what she would do but she probably didn't want to do anything but be left alone.

The next day she was gone and everybody forgot about her, or at least stopped talking about her. It's a good thing she didn't fall, though, because then, when you looked out at the buildings, especially when the sun is shining, you might remember and get sad, and there's already enough to be sad about.

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