

The Farm at the East Cove Hotel is about a family of friends on the north coast of California. Humor, Love, Daring, Sacrifice, Forgiveness, Improvisation, and Surrender help them find their places in the collective ferment.

The Farm at the East Cove Hotel

By Todd Walton

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THE FARM
at the
EAST COVE
HOTEL

a novel by

Todd Walton

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1. All She Has

Lucia Vaccaro is fifty-nine and has lived in the small town of Mercy on the far north coast of California since she was twenty-five and came from Italy to marry Mario Vacarro, an elderly childless widower descended from Italian Americans who settled in Mercy in the 1800s.

A devout Catholic, Lucia gave birth to a daughter nine months and seven days after she and Mario wed. They named their child Sophie after Mario's mother, and gave her the middle name Allegra after Lucia's grandmother.

Mario worked in Mercy's only lumberyard for fifty-four years and died when Sophie was three. He left his two-bedroom house on the south side of Mercy along with a small savings to Lucia who was by then suffering from debilitating rheumatoid arthritis and would never remarry.

*

Sophie is now thirty-three, tall and strikingly beautiful with long dark brown hair and olive skin. A gifted athlete and brilliant student fluent in Italian, English, and Spanish, Sophie graduated from high school at fourteen and got a full-time job at *Walker's Groceries* where she worked for nineteen years – until yesterday.

When she was seventeen, Sophie took *Beginning Pottery* at the community college, bought a potter's wheel and kiln, and turned the garage into a pottery studio where for sixteen years she spent her evenings and weekends making pottery while listening to audio books in several different languages – until yesterday.

Lucia calls Sophie *my angel* because until today Sophie did all the shopping, cooked all the meals, did all the housework, and supported them with her wages because Lucia has never had a job due to her rheumatoid arthritis and morbid obesity.

*

"I can't believe you're doing this," says Grace, Sophie's best friend since First Grade. "Or that I'm *helping* you do it. You seem so *calm*. But then you always seem calm when I'm on the verge of hysteria. Yet we're friends."

"*Best* friends," says Sophie, as they head south on the coast highway, Grace driving her electric Subaru. "Life would have been untenable here without you."

"No one else I know uses words like *untenable*," says Grace, her carrot-red hair in a pageboy. "I can't believe you're going. I'll miss you so much."

"Does feel rather dreamlike," says Sophie, smiling at Grace. "Maybe this is a dream."

"I can't believe you didn't tell your mother," says Grace, shaking her head. "She will be so freaked out."

"Which is why I didn't tell her," says Sophie, gazing out the window at Mercy Bay sparkling in the early morning sunlight. "She would freak out and never stop freaking out until I changed my mind, and I'm not changing my mind because if I don't go I'll kill myself. So which would you rather have? A pen pal in Japan or me dead?"

"Of course I want you to go," says Grace, who after graduating from Yale lived in New York City for a year before returning to Mercy, marrying her high school sweetheart, and becoming an English teacher at Mercy High. "I'm just saying she'll go insane."

"She's already insane," says Sophie, matter-of-factly. "I've taken care of her since I was six. No more."

"But how will she survive without you?" asks Grace, who never thought Sophie would ever leave Mercy.

"I've left thirty thousand dollars in our checking account," says Sophie, her eyes fixed on the road ahead. "I hired Maria Gomez to shop for her and make her a big supper three days a week so she'll have leftovers in between. Leila Townsend says she'll come visit her

every couple days and help her pay her bills and apply for more disability money, and Bob Morton will drive her to her doctors' appointments for twenty dollars per appointment. If things become unsustainable she can sell the house and go into Sherwood Convalescent. I talked to Conchita at Ontiveros Realty and she said the house is worth close to a million. I put all that in the letter you'll give Mama tomorrow." Sophie rests her hand on Grace's shoulder. "There's nothing more I can do, Gracie. Believe me."

"I believe you," says Grace, crying. "I just wish I was going with you."

*

To avoid the eternal traffic jam around San Francisco, Grace leaves Sophie in Santa Rosa to catch an air-porter bus to San Francisco International Airport.

Sophie sits in a window seat and hopes the bus doesn't fill up, but it does, and the woman sitting next to her wants to talk.

"I bet I know where *you're* going," says the woman, her accent Midwestern, her frizzy hair dyed blonde. "Hollywood. Am I right? I worked in a modeling agency in Kansas City for seventeen years and you check all the boxes, honey. Poise, beauty, and that certain something only a lucky few are born with."

"Actually," says Sophie, tickled by the woman's compliments, "I'm going to Japan to apprentice with Arata Inaba, a master potter. It's a miracle he chose me."

"A potter?" The woman wrinkles her nose. "Darn. I thought for sure you were an actress. I even thought I might have seen you in something."

"I *was* in a play at *Mercy Players Theatre* five years ago," says Sophie, recalling those glorious evenings on the stage. "I would have been in more plays, but I was working full-time and taking care of my mother and throwing bowls and vases for the farmers market, so I

couldn't spare the time. But I loved being in a play more than anything."

"That's the thing," says the woman, sighing. "You make a choice and the next thing you know you're sixty-five. Or *I* am anyway. How old are you, hon? Don't tell me. Twenty-three?"

"Add a decade," says Sophie, wistfully. "I turned thirty-three a week ago."

*

After an eternity getting through airport security, Sophie hurries to her boarding gate and finds the waiting area so crowded there are no seats left, nearly everyone in the waiting area Japanese.

She looks at the clock on the wall next to the boarding gate and sees the time is seven minutes to three, her flight to leave at three-thirty.

My shift ends at four. Then I ride my bike to the house where I've lived my whole life except for a few magical weekends in San Francisco going to museums and art galleries. Mama is on the sofa in the living room watching television and counting the minutes until three when she'll take another dose of painkiller and then count the minutes until I come home at four because I'm all she has.

"I can't leave her," Sophie whispers as she gazes longingly at the gateway to the jet. "I can't do this."

Now an elderly Japanese man rises from his seat nearby, bows to Sophie, and says in English, "Please you sit my chair."

"Thank you," says Sophie, speaking Japanese. "I'm happy to stand."

The man smiles and replies in rapid-fire Japanese.

"Forgive me," says Sophie, bowing politely and replying in her slower Japanese. "I'm not sure what you said."

"Please you sit my chair," says the man, reverting to English and gesturing to his seat beside a gray-haired woman. "My wife Akiko. I am Yukio Tanaka."

"I am Sophie Vacarro," says Sophie, sitting beside Akiko.

"Your first time going to Japan?" asks Akiko, speaking slowly in Japanese.

"Yes," says Sophie, the effort of thinking in Japanese negating her impulse to return to her mother. "My first time flying, too. I am apprenticed to Arata Inaba in Hagi. He is a master potter."

"We will take you to Hagi," says Akiko, nodding assuredly. "Our daughter and her husband live in Fukuoka not far from Hagi. We go there often to see our grandson."

*

On the jet high above the Pacific, Sophie has two beers with supper and falls asleep for the first time in four days.

She dreams she is sitting with her mother on the living room sofa watching a sit-com.

She gets up to leave the room.

"Don't go," complains her mother. "I haven't seen you all day."

"I'm going to Japan to study with Arata Inaba," she says, gazing steadfastly at her mother. "I sent Inaba san pictures of my best vase and he accepted me."

"Stop it!" says her mother, glowering at her. "Sit down and watch my show with me."

"No," she says, turning to go. "I'm done with you."

*

Sophie wakes on the jet high above the Pacific, a new day dawning – the flight to Japan nearly over.

Mama knows now. Grace gave her my letter.

The middle-aged man next to Sophie looks up from the book he's reading and says to Sophie in Japanese, "I'm amazed. You slept through all the terrible turbulence. Everyone thought we were going to crash. People were wailing and crying. Yet you never woke up. Oh I wish I could sleep like you. What is your secret?"

“I have no secrets now,” she says, loving speaking Japanese. “Maybe that’s why I slept so well.”

Ω

2. Saint Carlos

Carlos Garcia, a weightlifter with a black belt in karate, was born in Mercy forty-nine years ago and bears a striking resemblance to the actor Clark Gable, had Clark Gable been five-feet-five and Mexican. Carlos has been employed by the Mercy postal service since he was twenty-seven following an eight-year stint in the Army. For all his twenty-two years with the postal service Carlos has been a rural mail carrier delivering letters and packages to the far reaches of the Mercy zip code.

*

On this overcast morning in October, accompanied as always by his big silver malamute Pequeño, Carlos decides to drive the old white postal jeep up Andrea Koestler's long dirt driveway to spare Andrea the steep trip down to her mailbox on Rural Route 12. And in front of her old farmhouse they find Andrea lying on the ground amidst her rose bushes, her long white hair tangled in the thorny branches.

"Thank God you came up to the house today, Carlos," says Andrea, pale and wan and in great pain. "I was pruning and twisted my ankle and fell. Broke my wrist. Heard it snap. I left my phone in the house so I couldn't call Jerry. If you hadn't come up I'd be lying here until dark, and we've had bears going after the apples lately so who knows what might have happened."

"You want me to take you to the hospital?" asks Carlos, assessing the situation: a very large woman needing to be lifted out of a tangle of rose bushes and either helped up seven rickety stairs into her house or into the jeep full of mail and packages and Pequeño.

"No," says Andrea, trying and failing to sit up. "If you can get me into the house and get some ice on my ankle and wrist I'll be okay until Jerry gets home and can take me to the ER."

“No problem,” says Carlos, deciding the best plan is to get *behind* Andrea and lift her into a standing position. “Would you mind if I cut away some of your rose bushes to get a better angle for lifting you?”

“Whatever you need to do,” says Andrea, grimacing at the terrible pain. “Thank God you’re so strong, Carlos. I’m ashamed how much I weigh now.”

“Don’t be ashamed. You’re fine,” says Carlos, signaling Pequeño to get out of the jeep. “Any idea where your clippers got to?”

“I flung them that-a-way when I started to fall,” she says, pointing with her unbroken hand. “So I wouldn’t stab myself.”

“Good thinking,” says Carlos, going in search of the clippers.

*

When Carlos has Andrea settled on her sofa with bags of ice on her ankle and wrist, he brings her water and a couple pain pills, feels her pulse, and is assured by her strong steady heartbeat she’ll be okay until her son gets home.

“Thank you, Carlos,” she says, starting to cry. “How’d you get so strong? You lifted me like I was nothing.”

“I got bullied at school because I was little,” he says, wishing he didn’t have to leave. “So I started lifting weights and going to Nakamoto’s dojo, and I’ve been lifting and practicing karate ever since.”

“I got bullied, too,” says Andrea, sniffing. “For being chubby.”

“I’m sorry that happened to you,” says Carlos, solemnly. “Our son Tito got bullied, too. So the summer after First Grade we got him going to Nakamoto’s. Once he knew how to defend himself, nobody messed with him anymore. Taught him discipline, too, and respect for his teachers. He loved it. Hey I gotta go. Call me if you need any help before Jerry gets home.”

“The pain pills are kicking in,” she says, closing her eyes. “You’re a saint, Carlos.”

*

A mile further along curvy pot-holed Rural Route 12, Carlos and Pequeño come to the bottom of Big Meadow Drive, a mile-long dirt track ascending through redwoods and hemlocks to a large meadow ringed by four houses, each house on a ten-acre parcel. Carlos won't drive up the track during the rainy season, but today the road is dry and he has several packages for folks living at the meadow.

He switches into four-wheel-drive and goes slowly up the rutted track with Pequeño sticking his head out the window and barking excitedly because his sweetheart Miranda, a beautiful Husky, lives at the meadow.

"Paciencia Pequeño," says Carlos, smiling at his companion. "We'll be there soon."

As they come around a sharp bend in the track, Carlos slams on his brakes and stops just inches from of an enormous boulder blocking the way. Carlos backs up a few feet, sets the parking brake, turns off his engine, and climbs out to see if he can move the huge spherical stone.

Three residents of Big Meadow are gathered on the other side of the boulder, their journeys to the outside world stymied by the massive stone.

"Sorry about that, Carlos," says Jan Carlton, a buxom brunette in her forties. "We didn't have time to put up a warning flag for you. Must have just happened. We walked down to the mailboxes an hour ago and the road was clear."

"We called Arno Gibs," says Colin Kaminsky, a lanky former redhead in his seventies with a slight British accent. "He said he *might* be able to get his dozer up here this afternoon, but probably not until tomorrow. You know Arno. Immediacy has never been his strong suit."

"So we're stuck," says Jan, glaring at the massive stone. "Which means we'll miss ten-percent-off day at *Walker's*."

“And Miranda’s almost out of dog food,” says Gina, Jan’s ten-year-old daughter, her brown hair cut short as befits a serious soccer player.

Carlos walks around the huge boulder to where he can look down the steep slope to Big Meadow Creek, barely a trickle this time of year.

“If we push it over here,” says Carlo, resting a hand on the mighty orb nearly as tall as he, “it should stop somewhere in the creek bed before it gets down to Road 12.” He laughs. “We hope.”

“My esteemed friend,” says Colin, frowning dubiously at Carlos. “This behemoth weighs more than a car. How do you propose we push it without a bulldozer?”

“You’d be surprised how strong a bunch of people can be,” says Carlos, grinning at Colin. “Who else is home at the meadow right now?”

“Tammy and Roger,” says Jan, frowning dubiously, too. “Phil’s in San Francisco and Joan and Guy are in Toronto. Their daughter just had a baby.”

“Asna pulled a hamstring yesterday so *she* can’t help,” says Colin, resting a hand atop the boulder.

“Run get Tammy and Roger,” says Carlos to Gina. “Take Pequeño with you, por favor. He’s been longing to see Miranda.”

So while Gina and Pequeño run up to the meadow, Carlos tells Jan and Colin about Andrea breaking her wrist and waiting for Jerry to get home to take her to the ER.

“I’d take her if we could get out of here,” says Colin, shrugging painfully. “Except she and Asna aren’t talking to each other these days. An unfortunate emotional impasse, so...” He shrugs again and falls silent.

“We went to the ER a couple months ago when Phil slashed his leg chopping kindling,” says Jan, shaking her head. “We waited *seven* hours to see a doctor. Nurses had to give him a shot of painkiller in the waiting room. That place is a nightmare.”

“Anything thrilling going on in town?” asks Colin, changing the subject.

“Ricardo’s playing at *Big Goose* tonight,” says Carlos, smiling. “And they’re painting the bank again.”

“Don’t tell me,” says Jan, closing her eyes and bowing her head. “White?”

“No, like a rainbow,” says Carlos, laughing. “Yes. White.”

Now Gina and Pequeño return with Tammy, a sturdy woman in her fifties, Roger, a gangly fellow in his sixties, and Miranda the beautiful Husky.

“Okay,” says Carlos, standing where he can push against the heart of the stone. “Roger and Tammy get on either side of me, Colin next to Roger, Jan next to Tammy, Gina next to your mother. Get your feet planted so they don’t slip as you push, and make sure the palms of your hands are pressing against the boulder. On my count of *three* we’ll push together with all our might and don’t stop pushing even if it feels like nothing is happening. Okay?”

“Impossible,” says Roger, shaking his head. “This rock weighs tons.”

“I believe we can do this,” says Carlos, winking at Roger. “Let’s try.”

So everyone gets in place, Carlos counts “One, two, *three*,” and with surprising ease they roll the massive stone off the road and watch it tumble down through the dry underbrush and hit the rocky creek bed with a resounding crash.

“We did it! We did it!” shouts Gina, jumping up and down.

“I can’t believe it,” says Roger, gazing in awe at Carlos. “It was like it *wanted* to go.”

“Methinks that was mostly you, Carlos,” says Colin, patting Carlos on the back.

“That was all of us,” says Carlos, knowing he supplied most of the power.

“Why didn’t we *film* that?” says Tammy, smacking her forehead. “Would have gone viral for sure.”

*

That night, Carlos and his wife Ophelia go to *Big Goose*, Mercy’s premier pub, to hear their old friend Ricardo play dreamy jazz on the pub’s grand piano, the music taking Carlos back to when he was seven, the summer between Second and Third Grade.

A family from Sweden, the Gustafsons, moved into the house across the street and Carlos’s mother Rosa had Carlos and his younger sister Maria deliver a lemon cake to the Gustafsons to welcome them to the neighborhood.

A big boy with long brown hair answered the door. Carlos guessed the boy would be starting Fifth or Sixth Grade, but he turned out to be exactly Carlos’s age, their birthdays three days apart in October. His name was Lars, and for the rest of the summer he and Carlos were inseparable.

On the first day of Third Grade, Lars and Carlos walked across town to Mercy Elementary together. Carlos was deathly afraid Lars would join the gang of bigger boys who bullied Carlos and the other little kids, but he didn’t say anything about being afraid because he didn’t want Lars to think he was a sissy.

Then at morning recess big Sam Schneider came up to Carlos and punched him in the shoulder, and in response Lars slugged Sam in the forehead with such force that Sam collapsed and lay so still Carlos thought Sam might be dead.

No one ever bullied Carlos again until Lars moved back to Sweden the summer after Sixth Grade. Then at recess on the first day of Seventh Grade, Carlos was playing soccer with a gang of friends when Sam Schneider and his huge accomplice Happy Thompson came to hurt Carlos.

“Lars is gone, punk,” said Sam, striding toward Carlos. “You’re dead.”

Rather than flee, Carlos assumed the stance for sparring at Nakamoto’s dojo.

“Little turd thinks he’s Bruce Lee,” said huge Happy Thompson, striding toward Carlos, too.

And when the bullies got close, with a hundred kids looking on, Carlos unleashed a barrage of powerful kicks and punches that brought Sam and Happy to their knees, both of them begging Carlos to stop.

*

Ricardo finishes the tune to a smattering of applause and begins a melancholy waltz that takes Carlos back to his last year in the Army when he was stationed in Germany.

He was lifting weights one evening and recalled lifting weights with Lars in the Gustafson’s garage after school, and he remembered it was the Gustafsons who paid for him to take karate lessons with Lars at Nakamoto’s dojo because Carlos’s mother couldn’t afford the lessons.

This recollection inspired Carlos to hunt up Lars’ phone number in Sweden and call him, and Lars invited Carlos to come visit him in Halmstad where he was completing a residency in Pediatrics.

Carlos took trains from the Army base in Munster to Grenaa in Denmark, and in Grenaa he caught a ferry to Halmstad in Sweden where Lars was waiting for him.

When they saw each other from a great distance, not having seen each other since they were twelve-years-old, they called each other’s name in the very same moment.

Ω

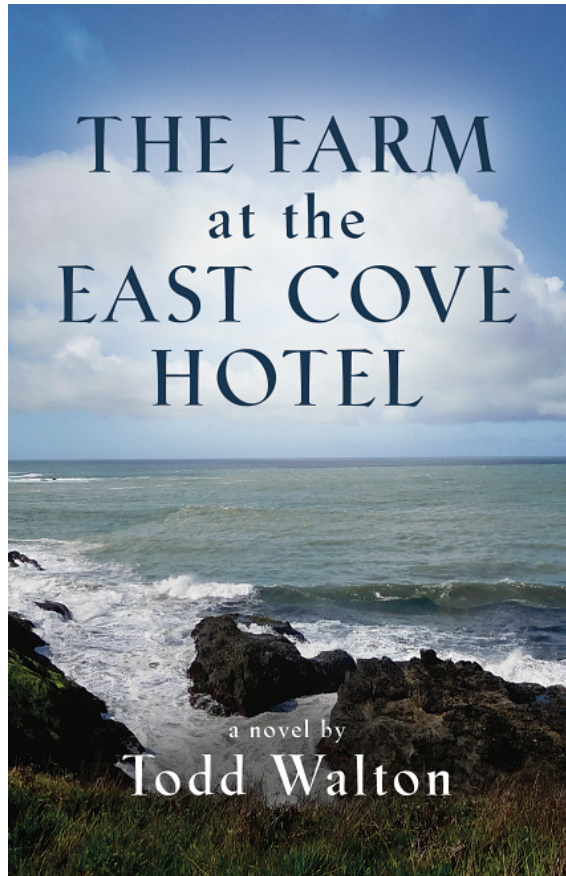
Gratitude

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About the Author

Todd Walton is the author of many works of fiction including: *Inside Moves*, *Forgotten Impulses*, *Ruby & Spear*, *Buddha in A Teacup*, *Under the Table Books*, *Little Movies*, *Why You Are Here*, *Good With Dogs and Cats: the adventures of Healing Weintraub*, and *Pooches and Kiddies: the further adventures of Healing Weintraub*. His many albums of original songs include *Dream of You*, *Ceremonies*, *Lounge Act In Heaven*, *Mystery Inventions*, *Incongroovity*, *Ahora Entrás Tu*, and *Hip Salon*.

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