



Left Coast Karma
Jonathan Vaught

Published: 2009

Categorie(s):

Tag(s): "project revolution" short fiction story "Creative Commons" mystery technology humor

1.

I hadn't seen Kevin in forever. He got scooped up by Karma and swept off to California to work on some super-secret project involving world domination and, for all we knew, time travel. He was the lone wolf, the alpha geek and, oddly, the party animal in our cadre of college friends. Considering all that, I was surprised when he told me he was getting married.

You know how it is, right? Your cell phone rings, or, more likely, your email dings. You see this name on the screen, one that you used to see every day but no longer, and the first thought that comes to mind is *what do they want from me?*

You have a pretty good idea. They've either been sucked into a pyramid scam, or their life is about to change. In Kevin's case, his email was to the point:

"Hey dude. What's your mailing address?"

Which could only mean I was getting a wedding invitation—or worse, one of those awful "Save the Date!" magnets with a cheery photo of my former pal and some perky California stranger. Probably both wearing J.Crew and standing on a hillside under a big oak tree in wine country. Not at all like Kevin.

I wrote back and gave him my address, along with the standard small talk: what have you been up to lately? How's Karma treating you? How's California? Etc. Meaningless questions that you'd never need to ask a close friend. I didn't expect an answer anytime soon. Kevin wasn't much for idle chatter. I got one, though, and it was more or less what I expected.

"I'm getting married in September. We're having a bunch of people out for an engagement party. Taryn's sending out invitations tomorrow."

Taryn. It sounded California enough. J.Crew indeed. I wrote back asking for more details, but knowing Kevin, that was all the info I was going to get.

When the invitation came, two weeks later, I had some frequent flyer miles saved up on a credit card, and plenty of curiosity—about the woman, the job, and California—so I was all in.

Sure enough, there was a refrigerator magnet in the envelope. With no photo on it.

2.

I wasn't expecting a greeting committee at San Francisco, and I didn't get one. It was Friday evening and Kevin worked programmer's hours. One thing I'd gotten out of him was that his job had weekly deadlines, and though overtime was officially discouraged at Karma, working nights was considered a badge of honor. They didn't have bunk beds and free snacks for nothing. They hired the kind of person who *wanted* to work all hours. Someone who didn't even think of it as work. Kevin would just as soon stay up all night inventing a new web server as playing Xbox, or playing with some girl. It was all play to him. Never one to dig below the surface of things like that, was Kevin.

I didn't mind that no one was there to meet me—I liked traveling alone and going where I wanted. I'd read that the Bay Area was easy to get around if you stuck to public transportation. I retrieved my duffle bag from the conveyor and hopped the BART over to the CalTrain station. The train's PA reeled off a string of bland, vaguely California names: Burlingame, Hillsdale, Belmont. They all ran together in an endless suburban sprawl outside the train window. I could have been outside of Los Angeles, or Fresno for all I knew. Kevin said he'd bought a house in Menlo Park, which meant nothing to me. I thought Menlo Park was in New Jersey. The engagement party was on the Karma campus in Redwood City. I'd booked a hotel there, on El Camino Real and just around the corner from the CalTrain station. I had hopes of getting up to San Francisco proper at some point.

You may wonder why I was out here all by myself, why no one else from the old college crew made the trip. I guess I was closer to Kevin than most of them. Not everyone can tolerate a person like him. He kept us all entertained, but a class clown doesn't make the greatest of friends, and when your hobby keeps you at the computer day and night... you get the picture. And since I'm being honest, I'm the only single guy left. Everyone else has either moved away like Kevin, or has a wife and kids. I bet it's a hard sell convincing your wife to fly across the country, for one weekend, to visit your former friend that she may have met once or twice. I, on the other hand, was unattached. Portable, you might say. And I meant to make the most of it. This Taryn girl had to have a single friend or two.

After an uneventful night in my uneventful hotel, I dialed Kevin over a fast-food biscuit. No answer. He'd probably pulled an all-nighter and

was crashing hard with his cell off. The party was in the evening, so I figured I had time to see the city.

I studied a transit map on the long train ride back to town—I wanted to have a plan when I got there and I hated wandering the streets looking like a tourist. Everyone else was jacked into something electronic. I counted seven iPhones, four PSPs, a DS, and two Kindles from where I sat. I didn't bother to count cell phones or laptops. I wondered what these people thought of my so-last-century map, if they noticed anything at all outside their digital bubbles.

At the end of the line, I walked a few blocks through the SOMA wilderness of repurposed warehouses until I found Union Square and the cable cars. Tourist or not, who doesn't want to ride one of those things? It being Saturday, the line was long and the car was packed like the proverbial box of Rice-a-Roni. I didn't see much from inside the knot of gawkers, but hey, I'd done it. I got off at the top of Russian Hill to check out the pretty old houses and stunning views—just long enough to realize that San Francisco feels ten degrees colder than the actual temperature and I hadn't brought a jacket. I bought the least touristy sweatshirt that Ghirardelli Square had to offer (blue and gold Cal hoodie, if you must know) and walked a few blocks over to North Beach for pizza. Afterwards I set the leftovers next to a sleeping homeless guy. San Francisco is full to the gills with them. If you've never been, like me, that fact will hit you even harder than the terrific views. I read somewhere that the town is really good to them, or they just love the place too much to live somewhere else they could afford. Maybe some were casualties of dot-com or real estate. I wondered how many people who worked here could actually afford to live here. I passed by the Fisherman's Wharf complex, seething with tourists, and walked a few blocks of the financial district. It was midafternoon by now, and I did have a party to get to. I rode back to the CalTrain, this time on a city bus. Much different sort of crowd than the cable car.

3.

I put on my best imitation of a California party outfit and took a cab to the big event. I was right—there seemed to be enough attractive and unattached women to spare one for me. I didn't recognize anyone else there, except for...

"Kevin! Where've you been hiding all weekend? I've had nothing to do. This place is dead, you know."

"DUDE! This is awesome! You made it!" He gave me a guy hug, the kind where you shake with the right hand and back-pat with the left. "I'm really sorry we couldn't hang out before the party. I had to work until like 5 am last night and then I slept *all day*. Taryn was worried I wasn't going to make it here on time." He shot a worshipful look at his mystery girl. I'd never seen that look on the Kevin I knew. I followed his gaze to the woman three steps away. Yep, she was California to the bone. And—there's no other way to say it—HOT. Which, for Kevin, was kind of rare. I know I said he enjoyed the ladies and they enjoyed him. Funny thing about Kevin, though, he wasn't picky. I'd seen him chase a 5 or a 6 like she was on the Sports Illustrated swimsuit cover. He wasn't what I'd call ugly, but being a computer nerd cost him a couple of points right off the top, so it was probably a good thing he didn't discriminate. OK, he'd brought home the odd 8.5. Maybe even a 9 once. But this Taryn was an 11, easy. And I'm not just saying that because of the whole California-girl mythos. Maybe this wasn't LA, but I'd been here all day and I'd seen the scenery. This girl still made the top of the list.

Was this the Kevin I knew? All of a sudden I had doubts. There are all these subtle physical changes you notice when you haven't seen someone in a long time. Hairstyle, clothes, weight, mannerisms all change with your environment and your lifestyle. The voice was the same, but when it came to her... He spoke her name, still fawning, and she turned to look at us. Flashed a perfect smile. Perfect teeth, perfect skin, lashes that looked fake but you knew they weren't. Normally I wouldn't comment on a woman's lashes, but I was trying really hard to keep my gaze above chest height. I didn't think she was even wearing makeup. She didn't need it. I spoke first to break the spell she was casting.

"So you're the woman that managed to get my old roommate back in touch with me. Hope he hasn't been too much trouble to tame." She laughed a perfect laugh and I actually shook my head a little to clear it.

Kevin made formal introductions, sounding like a teenager. I swear I heard his voice crack.

Taryn kept that megawatt smile focused on me. "You're the one that came all the way out from Carolina. Thank you so much for coming! I was hoping to meet someone that knew Kevin in college. I expect a full history before you leave here tonight!"

"North Carolina," I heard Kevin put in. "People out here always lump them together," he said to me. He gave her my brief bio. I realized he was competing for her attention, and she knew it. Kevin *never* competed for a chick's attention. She winked at me and mock-rolled her big blue eyes. "So what was my man *really* like in college?"

"If he was up all night writing code, he hasn't changed much."

"I know! I'm a night owl myself, but that's just crazy. I told him I'm cutting that off after the wedding. He's going to be home no later than six. No cheating on me with work." The thought of anyone cheating on this woman made me snort. She started to say something else, but was interrupted by a hello from another guest. I found myself resenting the intruder. Kevin clapped me on the back. "Let's get a drink, bro. I'll introduce you to some of the guys I work with."

Kevin and I spent the better part of the next hour at the bar, slinging programmer lingo with Karma people. I lived in Raleigh, the geek capital of the South if there was one, and even there the opportunity to socialize with people in my line of work was rare. Still, I wasn't about to choose hanging at a bar with nerds over face time with someone who had two X chromosomes and a California pedigree, so when one came close to the bar, I nudged Kevin for an introduction.

Dana also worked for Karma, as a social marketing specialist. Which basically meant she spent her days pushing the company Kool-Aid on FriendFeed or Twitter or whatever today's buzzword was. Inside of two minutes, she'd whipped out her brand-new Karma K2 phone and added me as her Facebook friend. Which kind of took the thrill out of getting her phone number. Taryn rescued me from that conversation and took me to meet her parents, up from Los Angeles. Mom was an investment banker and Dad a pharmaceutical rep. I realized I hadn't asked Taryn what she did for a living. She waved her hand breezily. "Corporate real estate, mostly. I studied journalism at UCLA. I wanted to do the acting thing for awhile, but I thought I could do worse than selling houses while I waited for my big break. I got tired of that whole LA scene, and the real estate market was even better up in the Bay Area." She shrugged. "Not so much these days." After the folks, who were nice and

bland and rolling with money, she deposited me among her LA friends and left me in the land of skinny, blonde and tan. Brynn was in law school. Cara was an actress—sorry, I think they like to be called *actors* now—which I understood to mean she waited tables in between auditions. Renéé was an executive assistant. And so on. And most of them had boyfriends, of course. They lavished me with attention anyway, and questions about “Carolina”, which was a fun ego-stroke, but in the end pointless. After awhile, I ended up back by the bar, but Kevin and his friends were gone—vanished into a crowd of painfully cool Karma drones. I was about to go track him down when someone spoke at my elbow.

“It’s all fake, you know.”

I turned to look. A woman, clearly not part of the SoCal contingency I’d just waded through. Petite—I guessed a hair over five feet—brunette, spunky-cute. Wearing a sundress, a leather jacket, and an almost Gothic amount of eyeliner. Her hair was short and artfully messy. Her accent was so out of place that I smothered a laugh. Proper British; the flavor that matched the sundress, but not the jacket or makeup. I pictured some fantasy-novel elf trying to blend in at a London club.

“Tell me about it. I haven’t seen a real tan yet.”

“I mean it’s *all* fake. The party. The guests. The girl. All of it. It’s a show put on for your friend Kevin’s benefit.”

If this was some kind of hipster irony game, I’d play along. “So you and I are all that’s real?”

“You and I and him. And his co-workers from Karma. The bride’s side of the aisle are actors.”

“Isn’t everyone in Southern California? Who wrote the script, and can I meet the director?”

She raised an eyebrow, took a sip of her drink. “You really want to know?”

“I’d like to know your name so I can fact-check you later.” This was the most fun I’d had all weekend.

“Daisy. No, I’m not joking.” Her eyes dared me to object. “About any of this.” I tried to keep my face perfectly neutral. I never won the weekly poker game, so I don’t know how successful I was.

“Look, there are two groups of people here. Kevin and his friends from work. ‘Taryn’—the quotes around the name were loud and clear—and her people, who all happen to be from out of town, or another planet as far as the Karma people are concerned. Nobody on his side knows anybody on her side. And then there’s you. Don’t you wonder

why you're the only one here who's known Kevin for longer than two years?"

I told her my theory about being the most portable of his college friends. She snorted, if anyone named Daisy could be said to snort. "Right. Where are his family? Even his parents couldn't drag themselves out here?"

I opened my mouth and closed it again.

"Ask him about them. I suspect he'll say that *she* convinced him not to tell them about her at all." She pushed away from the bar and waved at me to come along. "Would you like some evidence?"

I followed before she could vanish among the taller Left Coasters. No wonder I hadn't noticed her before now. My mistake.

She waited by the guest book, hip cocked to one side in triumph. "Read the names."

I shrugged and glanced down at the page. I recognized my name, those of the Karma people I'd met, and one or two of the girls I'd been introduced to. I flipped backwards one page. John Rogers, Beth Jones, Michael Smith. The rest of the names were similarly devoid of personality. Even the handwriting was similar, if you looked at it closely. The same person could have signed every one. Now that I thought about it, her parents' names had been forgettable too. I couldn't remember them, but Jack and Jill weren't out of the question. It was definitely fishy.

"They didn't even try very hard to make it look authentic," Daisy said.

"Nobody reads those things, anyway," was all I could think of to say.

She took me by the hand and led me to a cocktail table for two on the edge of the room. I must have looked a little cloudy.

"So your next question is: who's responsible for this little charade, and why?"

"OK, sure. Why is this happening?"

"Go get us a drink. It'll look suspicious if we're just sitting here."

Another beer sounded like a fine idea, so I trooped back to the bar. Kevin was back there again. His eyes traced my path back to Daisy at the table. He grinned and held up a hand for a high five. "Nice work, bro."

"Kevin..." I trailed off, having no clue what to say next. "Do you..." He was still checking out my companion, who was furiously shaking her dark curls and waving me back.

"You can give me the 411 later." He gave me a shove. "Get back in the trenches, man."

Daisy sipped her beer, which was some Northern California microbrew that I'd never heard of, but Kevin swore by. She scrunched up her

face. "Didn't they have Guinness? Anyway. Do you know what Kevin does at Karma?"

I shrugged. "Some kind of R&D is all I know. They hired him because of some work he did on an open-source project. He didn't even apply. They came to him."

Daisy rolled her eyes. "Aren't you in the software business? And you don't know any more about it than that?"

"It's kind of just a job for me. Kevin lives it, you know?"

"Right. The open-source project your friend worked on in college was a network protocol called Freenet. It's a system for storing information with complete anonymity. Anything uploaded to Freenet is encrypted and distributed across the whole network. Someone else gets a piece of your data and you get a piece of theirs. No single node on the network knows what's stored on it. There's no central server, so there's no way to take the whole system down. It's the ultimate peer-to-peer."

That sounded vaguely familiar. "Cool. Why isn't everyone using it?"

"For one thing, it's slow. For another, the secrecy of it attracts the dregs of the Internet like flies to meat. Three of every five documents on Freenet are about child pornography, drugs, or bomb-making."

I didn't think that sounded like Kevin's cup of tea, and told her so.

"Of course not. Your friend has his faults, but he's not a neo-Nazi or a pervert. What he does have is curiosity, and idealism. The aim of Freenet is to protect freedom of expression. And if it could be perfected, it would be a death knell for old media. Recording, television, radio, publishing—these industries only exist because it used to be expensive to package and distribute information. Imagine if they had no way of tracking or shutting down the sharing of their content. They're all obsolete now. Some of them just haven't realized it yet."

I raised my hand. "Wait. I'm confused. This has exactly what to do with a bunch of actors at a party?"

"I'm getting there. The Internet is a vast cloud of information storage available to everyone with a computer. Karma, as an Internet company, wants the personal computer—the piece of hardware that sits on your desk or your lap—to become irrelevant. It's in their interest to provide a means of secure, anonymous, *free* file storage in the cloud, available to *everyone*. They can say they don't own the information itself, but they will be in complete control of it. Kevin is working on Karma's own, improved version of Freenet that they hope will replace the hard disk in your computer for storage of your personal content. Think what advertisers would pay for ads served up alongside every document you work

with, every piece of music you listen to, every recipe in your mother's email box. All of it. Kevin is worth quite a bit of money to them."

"So why are they doing this?"

"Oh, Karma isn't responsible for this play we're watching. It's being put on by the competition."

"The competition being...?"

"Karma wants to commoditize the computer operating system and replace it with the Internet. So who is threatened by that? Who makes the most popular operating system in the world?"

"Symbologix?"

"Got it in one! They need access to technical and strategic information, so they hire a beautiful woman to cozy up to a computer geek. Freenet itself is free and they can study it as much as they want, but a handful of hackers with spare time can't compete with the resources that a company like Karma can throw at the project. Karma's version is years ahead already. If Symbologix can put enough stars in poor Kevin's eyes, maybe they can erase some of Karma's advantage."

"So this is what, corporate espionage? An old friend of mine is about to marry a spy? That seems just a little farfetched."

"This kind of espionage predates the corporation by thousands of years. Haven't you ever heard the story of Samson and Delilah?"

"And as proof you show me a guest book with a bunch of fake names. This is fun and all, but what exactly is your part in this?"

Daisy smirked. "You'll figure out who I am eventually. But I would think the important thing is to let your friend know he's about to make a rather big mistake."

"Only if I believe your story."

"I think you do. Kevin wanted to catch up with you. Offer to take him out somewhere after the party, just you and him. Ask him about their relationship. If you're sufficiently convinced, meet me in the city tomorrow and we'll talk about how to get him out of her clutches." She scribbled a phone number on a napkin. Even her handwriting was girly, not exactly what you'd expect from someone who knew about things like open-source software and peer-to-peer networks. "Congratulations, you got my number. Call me in the morning."

She patted my hand, stood up and left me sitting at the table.

4.

I was sure I wouldn't be able to get Kevin away from his fiancée after the party. Especially not if Daisy's story was true. If there was a conspiracy here, surely I'd be the wild card in the plan—the unexpected guest from out of town, the rogue element. Maybe I was starting to enjoy this idea a bit much. Anyway, I sweet-talked first Kevin and then Taryn (I couldn't bring myself to add the quotes yet) into taking him out for coffee after the party. "As long as it's just coffee, no more beer," she warned with an adorable wink. "And I expect to see him in less than two hours!" We took his car to a donut place, where I gave him the third degree about Taryn while trying not to go out of college-buddy bounds. It went something like this:

"So she's hot, bro. How did she end up with a loser like you?"

"I ask myself that every day. Met her at a karaoke bar one night back in June. I know, right? She was singing directly at me, so I bought her a drink. That's pretty much it."

"Nice. How did she do meeting the family?"

"Oh, well, she hasn't met them yet. They don't even know we're getting married. I was planning on telling them in a couple of weeks."

"They don't know about her?"

"They know I'm with somebody, just not that I'm marrying her. Me and her talked about it, and since we've only been going out a couple of months, and my family is kind of traditional and all..." He shrugged. "I've been too busy to fly back home and visit, and I knew my parents were going on a cruise or something this weekend, so we figured they could just skip the party and come out for the wedding, you know?"

"Uh huh. How do you think they'll take the news?"

"Oh, they'll be real excited that I found someone to take care of me. They think I need looking after, for some reason. And they'll love her when they meet her. She has this effect on people."

"Yeah, I kind of noticed. So she's the one, then?"

"What's not to like? She's beautiful—I never even used the word beautiful before her—and she adores me, and she puts up with the weird work schedule. She even asks me about work. Not that she, you know, *knows* much technical stuff, but she's interested, asks me to show her what I'm working on and stuff like that. I taught her how to read some of it. She comes in when we're both working from home and sits with me and brings me snacks. I'm so spoiled."

“Wait, what? She wants to know about what you’re working on? No one’s ever been interested in my work before. They just wave their hands and say ‘he does something with computers’. And then they ask me to fix their email.”

“I know, isn’t it awesome? I thought it was kind of weird at first, but she’s a fast learner.”

“No kidding.”

5.

So that was the gist of what I learned about Kevin's girl. Enough to throw up a few red flags. A woman like that was interested in the details of his work? And Daisy had been right about his parents. Back at my hotel room, I set Daisy's number next to my phone and crashed.

At least, I tried to crash. Contrary to popular belief, caffeine and alcohol do *not* just cancel each other out. My body was tired out, probably not on Pacific Time yet, and I swear I could hear my brain actually buzzing. It was just not processing all this stuff about actors and giant software companies. And this chick I'd met—what kind of a name was Daisy, anyway?—was, what, some sort of corporate secret agent? Or she could be lying—for what reason, I couldn't begin to guess—or just nuts. Maybe she wanted Kevin for herself? That would be just great. Maybe I was being used to bust up a love triangle. Between a hacker, a super-model and a psycho? It seemed improbable.

And Kevin—he was my friend, or at least he used to be. I couldn't remember him ever *not* being happy, but he was the king of the world right now. Would I be doing him a favor by telling him the truth—if it was the truth? I sat up and opened the curtain. It wasn't blocking much of the light anyway. Suburbia was painted a washed-out streetlight yellow. I believed the conflict between Symbologix and Karma was real. I did read the tech news sites, after all. Was it serious enough—no, *serious* wasn't the right word; was it *comically insane enough*—to mess with the personal life of a single software developer? And if so, what would they do to me if I got involved? A psychology professor did this study on corporations once. He took a personality test, and answered the questions as if he were a big corporation, and the test results said he was a clinical psychopath. Hardly the kind of action I wanted to bring down on my head.

I squirmed in the understuffed armchair next to the window as the sky changed color from mercury-vapor yellow to predawn gray. California waved at me from every passing car and billboard. All the Spanish names felt foreign to me, even though a hundred years of film and culture made it more American than anywhere else I'd ever been. The clash was strange and wonderful. Like Daisy, with her impeccable accent and punk-hipster attitude.

At six-thirty I couldn't sit anymore. I picked up my phone, decided girls like Daisy weren't likely to be up so early, and stumbled downstairs to check out the free breakfast.

The eggs were rubber and the sausage was cardboard, but the coffee was awesome. I had a couple of cups while sort-of checking out the TV. CNN was running a profile on one of the presidential candidates. I'd heard his story before. He'd made a name for himself cleaning up crime after his family was killed in a home invasion. He'd been gutsy enough to do the right thing, whatever it cost.

At eight I felt human enough to pick up my phone and call Daisy. She picked up on the fourth ring. "I'll see you at the Marina in two hours." No hello, no nothing. Well. OK then. Back to the city.

6.

It had been sunny in Palo Alto, but rounding the hills into the city enveloped the train in clammy fog. Now *this* was what I had expected San Francisco weather to be like. I considered hopping a bus straight to the Marina, but found myself getting off at the cable cars again. I figured riding a cable car in the fog was like cruising the Sunset Strip in a convertible: if you get the chance, do it. No one else seemed to share my sentiment, so I didn't have to wait in line long. The clang of the bell was swallowed by the fog. Every now and then a breeze would sweep some of it away to unveil a swatch of bay in the distance, like scratching off a bit of a lottery ticket.

I strained to catch a glimpse of my rendezvous. A dozen movie scenes lit up my mind, starting and ending with *Vertigo*. I had no idea where my personal femme fatale might be waiting. The fog seeped through my sweatshirt and made me shiver. As I stepped on the concrete pier that curves out into the bay, I heard a phone ring. An old-fashioned sound, like a pay phone, straight out of one of those movies. I followed the sound to a bench and picked up a Karma K2 phone, with my name scrawled on a sticky note. Karma again.

"Hello?"

"Sorry I couldn't wait for you, dear. Something else came up."

"But—"

"I don't have time to say much more. If you care about your friend, get him away from that woman. There's more at stake than his self-respect."

Deep breath. "I'll do my best. And then?"

"Keep the phone. I'll be in touch. Just take care of Kevin."

"Will I see you again?" No. I did not just say that.

"If you do your job, you will. My plane's leaving. Gotta go. Best!"

From the direction of the bay, I heard the cough of an old engine turning over. Sounds carry over water, and the fog made it impossible to tell how far away, but it sounded like an airplane. In the bay? In this weather? Sure enough, as the engine caught, the sun pierced the murk just enough to illuminate the outline of an old seaplane two or three hundred yards out. It taxied out to the left, towards the Golden Gate Bridge with its blinking lights, turned around, and skimmed past me at full power. The plane broke free of the water and rose into the mist.

Flying a small plane in conditions like this had to be six kinds of illegal, was the only thought I could manage.

I took the phone from my ear and turned it over in my hands for a moment as the buzz of the plane faded. I had a flight of my own to cancel.

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