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Ruth Harris: Under the Prairie Moon

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RUTH HARRIS: UNDER THE PRAIRIE MOON

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INTRODUCTION: DISTILLING FICTION FROM LIFE

John Updike claimed that "the writer in the end must live his life and extract from it what poetry and fiction he can" (1779), but after extracting the raw elements, we must also distill the sweet and the bitter to make meaning, weaving in tendrils of life and digging deep into a rich humus. We must also notice how these lives are entwined with other lives in community and rooted in a place.

THE HEART'S FIELD: YOU CAN TAKE THE GIRL OUT OF THE PRAIRIE, BUT YOU CAN'T TAKE THE PRAIRIE OUT OF THE GIRL

In Alice LaPlant's fine craft book, *Method and Madness: The Making of a Story*, she encourages us to reach for a "marriage" of two extremes in our writing—between popular fiction, where the story "is all about surface events: who marries whom, who makes money, who kills, who dies, and so on […and] 'serious' but poorly written fiction that's all emotional subtext." She tells us that "[e]motions need to be attached to things of this world: things as mundane as tables and chairs and trees and flowers. Innocuous things—until we've imbued them with the power of our imagination" (LaPlant 400). Here she is really talking about stage props that make a setting multi-dimensional, which in turn helps our characters reverberate with emotion. One group of Midwestern artists was particularly concerned with setting: the architects of the Prairie School. In her foreword to *Frank Lloyd Wright and the Prairie School*, Lisa Taylor writes that they instilled in the buildings they designed "optimism and [a] general sense of purpose […] and [an] earnest moral tone, perhaps best described by the dual imperative that their work be both 'simple' and 'honest'" (7). In this way, artifacts, buildings, and places can take

on an emotional resonance, especially when linked to characters. Eudora Welty called location "the crossroads of circumstance, the proving ground of 'What happened? Who's here? Who's coming?' —and that is the heart's field" (qtd. in Kardos 49). In *The Art and Craft of Fiction*, Michael Kardos claims that the setting of a story should have a strong relationship with the characters (49). In her masterpiece of the Midwest, *O Pioneers!,* Willa Cather imbues the whole prairie with passion, until it becomes far more than just a setting for her saga. By the end of the book, we almost can't see where Alexandra ends and the land begins.

In *Fiction Writer's Workshop*, Josip Novakovich claims that "[t]he importance of setting could be expressed in this formula: Setting = Character = Plot. Out of a place, a character is formed; out of a character's motives, plot may follow" (28). Like me, my character, Ruth Harris, grew up in the Midwest. Like it or not, she lives in an agrarian culture, and at the turn of the century, that means a peculiarly industrial agriculture. The modern prairie is a land of dichotomy. Even though Ruth sees the damage commercial agriculture has done to the earth, spreading monoculture rather than diversity, relying on heavy machinery and chemical additives rather than the natural rhythms and biological processes of the soil, she can also appreciate the beauty of the landscape. She loves the changes that come every day, sometimes every hour. Despite the dysfunction of the corn/soybean rotation, she can still see that the land is a living organism, watching it go from the deep browns and blacks of the plowed field to the soft striping of green rows, to the lush emerald stalks climbing up into the blue sky, the bushy beans rippling in the wind to the horizon. The corn tassels, the beans bloom, and when they send out their fruit, they begin to toast to a tawny gold and then russet.

In *O Pioneers!* we don't need to look further than the first few pages to see that the book is centered on the land; the land is the heart of the book. The front piece holds an epigram—a description of agrarian fields—and Cather's poem, called "Prairie Spring." Of the five parts of the book, only Part V is titled with the main character's name, "Alexandra." The others are about the land or features of the land: "The Wild Land," "Neighboring Fields," "Winter Memories," and "The White Mulberry Tree." The book opens by giving the reader a panoramic view of a particular time and place, "[o]ne January day, thirty years ago, the little town of Hanover, anchored on a windy Nebraska tableland." The setting goes beyond static description, even personifying this little town, giving it agency, as the narrator tells us that it was "*trying* not to be blown away" (Cather 3, italics mine). We see the town, its buildings, roads, railway station, even a few general inhabitants scurrying about their business, and then the cinematic focus constricts and our attention is drawn to "a little Swede boy, crying bitterly" about his poor kitten (Cather 4). This is Emil, and we don't suspect yet what a tragic part he will play in the human drama. But the human drama is superimposed on and intertwined with the greater drama of the prairie.

My Ruth, like Cather's Alexandra, is self-aware about how much she treasures the land. In "Lady of Spain: *Una Novella Corta*" (a story that didn't make it into this thesis because of space considerations), Ruth longs for the prairie after moving to Spain with her young son, Ya, and her new partner, David:

> Ruth had anticipated this homesickness before they left. She knew enough about herself to plan for it in little illogical ways. Visiting her grandmother's farm on the prairie before the trip, she had found the top

half of a large turtle shell by the side of the road while she and Ya were picking blackberries. It was about the size of a basketball, bleached white and upside down. She could see the rib bones.

[…]

At first she thought it was the rind of a melon, the ribs little stems for the seeds, but that wasn't like any kind of melon she had seen. She turned it over with a stick and saw the unmistakable pattern of a tortoise's carapace. They carried it into the Piney woods just east of her grandmother's bean field, and they made a circle of stones together, and put the turtle's shell in the center. Ya was solemn as he held Ruth's hand, and she decided to create a ceremony for the two of them. She told him to close his eyes and visualize this place. *It was home. They would carry their home with them in their hearts and minds, just like the turtle carried his on his back. And when they went across the ocean, if they got lonely they could think of this circle and remember that they would come home again.*

"Is A-Spain across the ocean?" asked Ya.

"Yes. A big ocean. And we'll fly on a big plane to get there. And then we'll fly home in a big plane."

"Ok. Do they have turtles in A-Spain?"

"I think so." But Ruth didn't really know. "I'm not sure."

"What about cats?"

Ruth smiled. "Yes, cats. Of course cats. They're called '*gatos*.'"

> "Ok. What about berries?"
>
> Ruth laughed and gave him another hug. She smelled the sunshine on his little blond head and thought that nothing could be better than this moment. Then they sat in the center of the circle and ate all the blackberries in their pail, still warm from the sun.
>
> Here in Barcelona, when the loneliness became an ache, she would focus on that ring of stones, closing her eyes to imagine flying over the piney woods in big circles like a hawk. The circle would get smaller and smaller until she was just skimming the tops of the trees, then she'd drop straight down into her circle of stones. (Hays, "Lady" 17-18)

Willa Cather said that writing could be "as safe and commendable as making soap or breakfast food," but that it could also be much more in the service of art, "where the values are intrinsic" (qtd. in LaPlant 105-106). In *O Pioneers!,* we can easily see that Cather values the prairie, the cycles of life, and a wild heart.

In the Midwest, the big sky and the low horizon mean people can see what's coming: rain, a neighbor, trouble. If Ruth sees the flash of red and blue lights from her bedroom window, she can watch to see if the ambulance stops up at Blacker's or goes on down to Jim's or maybe over to Rankin's corner. On the Prairie, the open skyline means we don't feel hemmed in. We can take the long view. We have perspective. We remember our history and can wait a while to see what the future holds. We have no need to make snap judgments, but our native suspicion keeps us from being easy targets for a swindle. The Prairie School architects took advantage of the low prairie profile with their horizontal windows. In his book about Frank Lloyd Wright, H. Allen Brooks discusses

"the emphasis these architects placed upon a close relation between building and landscape, permitting the house to blend comfortably into its setting, whether it be the flat horizontal prairie, a hillside, or even a dramatic cliff" (10). As in Cather's *O Pioneers!* and Wright's designs, I aspire in my fiction to place my characters so naturally in their setting that they seem to grow organically out of it.

LOOKING FOR TROUBLE: "MARY, YOU DUMBASS; SHIT HAPPENS IN STORIES"

In *Making Shapely Fiction*, Jerome Stern tells us that "[t]ension is the mother of fiction" and that "[t]ension is created by conflict" (237). Since Dale Ray Phillips told me that I have had trouble getting conflict into my stories, I decided to look at the way other authors have done it. In Doris Betts' story, "The Ugliest Pilgrim," Violet Karl believes herself to be so ugly that she is on her way to Tulsa, Oklahoma to have a preacher "heal" her of her ugliness. We find plenty of tension in this story. We see it in the character, herself: between her lovely and delicate first name and her harsh, scarred face; in her interactions with other people: between the polite, pitying attention from strangers and her reticence, even rudeness; and in her own hopes and dreams: between her present state of ugliness and her potential future, cured beauty. All of this creates conflict even before we get to the action of the story, and Stern tells us that "[i]n much serious fiction, although the tension is high, the conflicts are psychological and philosophical" (237). He also tells us that the more [we] involve readers with [our] character, the more tension they feel, so character development is crucial" (238). Betts is a master of this kind of character development, but she also attaches this conflict to "things" as LaPlant discusses above (sometimes the "thing" is candy, sometimes her own face). We first meet Violet in a

Greyhound bus station, eating in an odd, analytical way. The description is rather sickening: “I sit in the bus station, nipping chocolate peel off a Mounds candy bar with my teeth, then pasting the coconut filling to the roof of my mouth. The lump will dissolve there slowly.” But then, the sentence continues with a peculiar twist, to end with a strange but lovely image: “and seep into me *the way dew seeps into flowers*” (Betts 1, italics mine).

Betts even puts tension into the description of Violet’s face. We see her gestures (licking the salt of the tops of crackers, sticking out her tongue at a man) before we see what her face looks like. On page one we get a tiny, tight paragraph—only two lines—which does for the reader exactly what the paragraph describes: “Whoever it was, he won’t glance back. People in Spruce Pine don’t like to look at me, full face” (Betts 1). In fact, the reader is not allowed to look at Violet “full face” until much later in the story. We know from the title that some powerful ugliness is at play here, but the description is doled out piece by piece, and not directly, but in a series of matter-of-fact asides. When we first meet her fellow traveler, Flick, he is drinking something. Violet says, “You’d think I could smell it, *big as my nose is*” (Betts 3, italics mine). Later, she reminds herself “to start the Preacher on the scar first of all—the only thing about me that’s even on both sides.” And then, in a paragraph all its own, “Lord! I am so ugly!” (Betts 5). In contrast, she has been collecting features she would like, as if she will order off a menu. She writes in her notebook the details about people she sees: hair color and texture, eye color, and we don’t realize at first why she is collecting these details, but after her lament about her ugliness, we understand with the following short paragraph: “I comb out my pine-needle hair. I think I would like blond curls and Irish eyes, and I want my mouth so large it will

never be done with kissing" (Betts 5). Violet is almost hungry for these details, and I don't think it's accidental that Betts pairs this hunger with Violet's eating: "The paratrooper sways backward on his stool and stares out of eyes so blue that I want them, right away, and maybe his pale blond hair. *I swallow a crusty half-chewed bite*" (Betts 6, italics mine).

Eventually, we do get to look at Violet "full face":

> I put Flick's paper in my notebook and there, inside, on a round mirror, my face is waiting in ambush for me. I see the curved scar, neat as ever, swoop from the edge of one nostril in rainbow shape across my cheek, then down toward the ear. For the first time in years, pain *boils* across my face as it did that day.[1] I close my eyes under that red drowning, and see again Papa's ax head rise off its locust handle and come floating through the air, sideways, like a gliding crow. (Betts 20, italics mine)

Now, when the ugliness is finally defined and examined, we can see tension in the description. The "ugly" scar is shaped like something beautiful—a rainbow. The description of the fateful accident is almost mystical. The ax head *rises*, *floats*, and *glides*, as if in slow motion. The ax itself is likened to a crow, a creature with agency, mystery, and intelligence. When we finally see Violet's face, it is transformed into something magical.

Tension and conflict is related to suspense, and Stern asserts that "[s]uspense is the way you make your audience worry. Suspense gets readers to keep turning pages" (233). And Betts gives us plenty to worry about. Will the preacher heal her? Will he even

[1] Even while I was looking for tension and conflict, I took time to admire some of the wonderful strong verbs Betts employs.

try? Will the strength of her faith beat the strength of the preacher's faking? Can Violet win Flick's forgiveness? Will Monty be waiting at Fort Smith? And finally, will he catch her? Some of these worries are part of the major action of the story; some of them are what Stern calls "zigzagging" or micro-plotting. He tells us that "[z]igzagging is on a smaller scale. It involves producing tension within a single scene by creating fluctuations of feeling to maintain a high degree of attention" (Stern 254). Violet has befriended two soldiers on the bus and begins to drink and play cards with them, and now trusts them enough to share the reason for her pilgrimage. But she offends Flick when she jokes that she won't swap his black skin when she's out shopping for her new looks. The worry is whether he will forgive her or not. First she tries to shrug it off: "'Well, you as much as said you'd swap it off!' I call. 'What's wrong if I don't want it any more than you?'" (Betts 8). But right away she regrets it: "'I hurt Flick's feelings. I didn't mean that.' I'm scared, too. Maybe, unlike Job, I haven't learned enough. Who ought to be expert in hurt feelings? Me, that's who." She calls, "'Flick? I'm sorry.' *Not one movement*" (Betts 9, italics mine).

Next, the tension grows as time passes. We learn about Violet's father's death, hear that Monty thinks the preacher's a fake, and watch Violet finish her drink, all while we wait for Flick to come around. Finally, "Monty says, 'Flick, you plan to give us another drink?'" But the answer is no. "He acts like he's going to sleep" (Betts 9). The tension builds. Violet and Monty continue their conversation, and we don't hear from Flick again for a full page. Finally, Flick corrects Violet's plant identification, "'It's a mollypop vine,'" and we know he has forgiven her, albeit grudgingly because he says it "out of one corner of his mouth. 'And it makes a green ball that pops when you step on

it.' He stretches. 'Deal you some blackjack?'" (Betts 10). And with his offer of a game of cards, we know his forgiveness is complete.

This story is full of tensions, big and small. From the surprising and opposing qualities that can exist in one character, to the spring-loaded action that adds to the conflict, Betts' "The Ugliest Pilgrim" keeps readers interested and invested in the characters.

In my story of Ruth's childhood, "Three Rafts on a Troubled River," I try two techniques to increase conflict in the story. In the first, I take Dale Ray Phillips' advice to think of the worst thing a character can say and make that character say it (Fiction Workshop). Ruth's brother, Joey, goes first. Ruth and her sister, Hannah, are lost somewhere on the river, and Joey is tormenting his younger sister, Penny, with idle speculation. Norma, Ruth's mother, reacts with uncharacteristic viciousness:

> Norma stands up and walks to the edge of the porch, peering into the dark drizzle. The moon is big, but mostly obscured by the cloud cover. Once in a while a space opens up in the cloudbank and the yard is illuminated for a second or two. A possum scuttles past on its way to the chicken coop, and then the yard darkens again.
>
> Now she realizes that the kids have been bickering. She hasn't been listening, but Penny is crying. What is Joey saying?
>
> "They'll have to wait until they find the bodies to have the funeral."
>
> Norma turns, savage. "For God's sake, Joey. Shut the hell up."

> Joey is stone still. Penny runs to Norma, clinging to her leg and weeping. (Hays, "Three" 29)

Here I tried to show how a child's natural but thoughtless morbidity gets a rise out of his mother, and his shocked but silent response shows that Norma's sudden outburst is atypical.

Another method I tried to inject tension into the story was "zigzagging" (though not, perhaps, the way Stern meant it) through four points of view. This came from an assignment suggested in my second semester with Lynn Pruett that I write a story modeled on "Magic Words" by Jill McCorkle (Pruett). "Magic Words" is told from three distinct points of view and takes place in a single night. The first draft of the story, which I wrote for Dale Ray Phillips' class, swung between Ruth's; her mother, Norma's; and the Forest Ranger, Frank Murrata's perspectives. Dale Ray suggested that the story lacked tension because it was missing the most important point of view: that of Kevin, Ruth's father (Phillips, Re: Three Rafts). In the revision, I added Kevin's perspective, which heightened the tension in the real story: not the obvious one about the girls' river adventure, but the story of the crumbling marriage of Ruth's parents. It was a good call, since Kevin's perspective gave me new insight into how utterly complicated life is, and it gave the story a richer emotional tapestry. Here is Kevin in the woods as he searches for his lost daughters:

> The trailhead opens into a meadow with a little dammed up lake for fishing. Kevin pauses for a moment at the edge, letting the exhaustion seep into his worry. The scraps of sky between the clouds show that darkness is falling. He shouldn't have called Jules. The last time he went to check in at

> the bait shop he had called Norma first, with nothing to report, then turned back to the phone, rattling the change in his pocket, to make another quick call. Julie had already heard about the missing girls on the news. He gave her the number of the bait shop phone booth. Calling Jules is sure to come back on him, but he had felt a strong need, in his panic, to hear her voice. To let her soothe him. Now, the clouds above are rolling across the sky and the moon hangs for a moment in one of the scraps. It is a silver eyelash suspended in the night. It is both bigger than he could imagine, and impossibly slim. He tries to think if it is waxing or waning, but the cloud slides past and disappears, and what does it matter, anyway? Kevin feels a new knowledge growing in him like a chancre. He knows that if anything happens to the girls he would never be able to leave Norma. He feels that awareness rolling around in his belly, and he wants to gut himself like a fish. He has never felt so frightened in his life. (Hays, "Three" 30)

My hope is that with the addition of the new point of view, the reader will understand the warring emotions and what is at stake for Kevin in the search for his daughters. I also hope that the careful release of information from various perspectives will heighten the suspense as the reader wonders about the fate of the girls.

KEY TO THE STORY: THE WHOLE WORLD IN THE FIRST LINE

The seed contains the entire plant—root to cotyledon. The egg encloses the whole embryo, from bug-eyed head to fishy tail. The chrysalis holds the perfect butterfly. Dale

Ray Phillips told us in a workshop that the first line contains the whole story: who, what, when, where, and how (Fiction Workshop). This revolutionized my reading and my writing. I've always known that first lines are important, loving some famous ones, even asking my students in the first fiction workshop I ever led to read the first line of every story in their anthology and pick out their favorites. We would construct the semester's reading list from that, but I didn't really know *why* the first line was so important. Garrison Keillor tells us in his radio broadcast that Gabriel García Márquez learned to write short stories from reading Kafka, and that first line of "The Metamorphosis" ("As Gregor Samsa awoke that morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed into a gigantic insect") "almost knocked [García Márquez] off the bed" (qtd. in Keillor 6). Incidentally, the first line *of One Hundred Years of Solitude* is one of my very favorites: "Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice" (qtd. in Keillor 6).

In R.V. Cassill's story, "The Rationing of Love," the first paragraph focuses our attention on a special regret of the narrator's father—his own failure of generosity in denying his son a second cup of coffee before he shipped off to the war. "For more than twenty years I was sure my father made too much of the coffee episode. Really, I told him whenever he mentioned the matter, it was nothing, nothing, nothing. I wished he would put it out of his mind. I hadn't taken it seriously to begin with and would long ago forgotten it if he had" (Cassill 213). How then, does this paragraph tell us the whole story? First, it places us in time. An important "episode" has taken place over twenty years ago (so this will be a long story), and the focus on it promises us that we will hear

exactly what "the coffee episode" is. Next, it tells us who: this story will involve the first-person narrator and his father. And finally, the strong denial of the importance of the episode leads us to wonder if just the opposite is true. The narrator thinks it's "nothing, nothing, nothing." ("The lady doth protest too much, methinks" [Shakespeare 3.2.130].) The narrator wants it forgotten, wishes his father would just put it out of his mind. I paused after reading this first paragraph. Yes, it promised a rich tale. I was excited to continue. However, it wasn't until finishing the story and rereading the first line and noticing something new, that I truly understood it. "*For more than twenty years I was sure* that my father made too much of the coffee episode." What happened *after* those twenty years? Did the speaker's certainty dissolve? He began his story protesting that the coffee incident didn't matter. He gave similar protestations when his father immediately regretted the denial and offered to make it right:

> "Come on back," he said. "Please, come on now, you've got time for one more cup of coffee with me."
>
> But I said I hadn't, and that I really, really had drunk all the coffee I needed for a while. (Cassill 216)

The speaker repeats words ("…nothing, nothing, nothing…." and "…really, really….") as if he is trying, trying to convince himself of the insignificance of the coffee episode.

By the end of the story, he is still insisting that the coffee episode doesn't matter, and that even if it did, his father's idea to set things right with his son is a "trick," and "a sentimental one" (Cassill 225). His father was challenging the narrator's belief that "[t]he things we had done wrong with our lives were signed, sealed, irretrievable" (Cassill 225). Only now the "reckless old fool," whom the narrator had painted throughout the story as

weak, indecisive, and ineffectual, and now compared to a "clownish acrobat" "with his old easy, floppy smile" (Cassill 225), abruptly takes charge, and we see the narrator's resistance unexpectedly turn as his father insists on making up for his long ago slip of closed-fistedness:

> "Now," he said, rather formally. "I could just as well have given you that cup of coffee you asked for that morning. Just as well as not."
>
> His trick depended on just one thing—on my willingness to believe in it, at the price of all I'd paid so much to learn. I guessed I could if I wanted to. Nothing was stopping me.
>
> I said, "Well, since we're here, why don't you get it for me now?" The worst had been ahead of us. Now it was behind us. Both of us could claim that much victory.
>
> He said that to give me the coffee I had asked for was just exactly what he intended to do.
>
> Like a boy, I followed him into the restaurant. (Cassill 225)

The father becomes formal, exact. He is now someone who knows his mind, someone with intention, someone to be followed. The narrator, despite his insistence that you can't go back, becomes innocent again, "like a boy" (Cassill 225), and lets his father's belated act of generosity begin to heal what ails them.

I've tried to take heed of what a carefully constructed first line can accomplish, and tried, in my own work, to stop missing opportunities for richness. That means both being more aware of what a first line can do when I begin my story, and going back to reconsider the first line in the light of all I have written when I reach the last page. An

early version of "Milk Fever" (then called "The Chastity Belt") began: "The night before Kiera was to arrive, Ruth had blusterous, maritime dreams." Dale Ray's notes say "Narrative hook is missing." and "Generally, writers tag names in opening pages with their relationship to protagonist (Phillips, Re: "The Chastity Belt"). I had failed on two counts. The revision begins: "Ruth couldn't quite forget that her husband, David, had slept with Diana before he slept with Ruth" (Hays, Milk Fever 35). Here I attempted to include a narrative hook that not only lets the reader see how these characters are related to each other but also shows us where the tension in these relationships lies.

Dreaming Fiction

Before I came down to Kentucky for my third residency, I was feeling trepidatious. I was set to study with Dale Ray Phillips, and I had met him, and heard a lot of stories about him, and Dale Ray has a reputation for being just a little bit—what can I say about Dale? He's scary, difficult, challenging? And I knew I needed a challenge like that, but I also feared it. I dreamed I was down in Murray for the residency, and Dale Ray was teaching us to hunt deer. It was a special kind of bow hunting. In real life, I know some bow hunters, and everything I know about hunting (which is not much) comes from them. In the dream, these hunters talked about the kind of hunting Dale was going to teach us, and they said only the best hunters knew how to do it, and very few of them were successful. This kind of hunting took on a mythic quality, and they were a little bit in awe of my opportunity to study this specialized kind of hunting.

My dream was about the July residency when I would study with Dale Ray for the first time. We were at a picnic table down by a lake, and bows were laid across the table.

Dale Ray was explaining: He told us that inside our bodies was a vast forest populated with deer. We were going to enter that forest and hunt the deer with our bows. I was confused, and more than a little concerned.

I said, “Dale Ray, how do the deer get inside our bodies?”

He said, “I don't know.”

I said, “Dale Ray, how do WE get inside our own bodies with the deer, and how do we get our bows in there?”

And he said, “I don't know.”

This wasn't helping me feel more confident, but I pressed on with my questioning, “Dale Ray, if we go down inside our own bodies with our bows and arrows, and find the vast forest, and track the deer, and then shoot them, isn't it going to hurt? Won't the arrow pierce us and come out our bodies?”

Dale Ray looked at me and said, “Only if you miss.”

SELECTIONS FROM *RUTH HARRIS: UNDER THE PRAIRIE MOON*

ENCOUNTER
PART I: CONVERGENCE
2004

"BOYS?" SHE ASKED, AS IF I HAD PLANNED IT THAT WAY. "YOU HAD ALL BOYS?"

I nodded. This wasn't going so well already.

We were sitting at the dining room table, a pot of tea between us. I looked out the window. The fog was still hovering over the house, though you could see past the grape arbor now. November had started out warm and soggy, but a cold front had come in, and where the fresh snow met the warm earth, a thick fog rose up, shrouding everything. She followed my gaze to the yard, and her voice softened with the next question.

"Pete…," she began, "is he still…?"

I hesitated. I had no idea how we got into this situation, sitting at my table together. She just showed up this morning out of the fog. In thirty years I haven't seen fog like this, except for the time I had to drive home from Lickskillet. That night I drove by instinct and feel, my eyes on the edge of a road that I could barely see. Afraid to stop, afraid to go on. Not sure I was on the pavement. Not at all sure I hadn't missed a turn.

She came, as I said, this morning, about ten o'clock. I work from home on Tuesdays and Thursdays, grading papers and planning lectures. I sit down at the computer with a cup of coffee when Evan leaves for the bus. I have to work while I'm still focused. By the time he gets home in the afternoon, I've left my desk and started a batch of bread or a pot of soup, but somehow when David comes home from work, I'm still in

the middle of all that, plus I've got some kind of sewing project half-finished on the dining room table, or I've left all that mess and wandered out into the garden.

This morning I was on my way to the kitchen for my second cup of coffee, and there she was, shrugging out of that theatrical black coat of hers with the mutton chop sleeves. It was so long on her that it dragged the ground in places and was now edged with snow. She hadn't yet cut her hair, and I had forgotten how long it was, and thick! Falling in waves almost to her butt. She had an unlikely bowler hat that I didn't remember, also black, but under her coat she wore overalls. And though they were gigantic on her legs, her belly filled out the bib, so she looked a bit like Humpty Dumpty. She was pretty far along.

She has come, I suppose, to see if I am living my dream—to see what chance she has at happiness. I had no idea how much I should be telling her. I took a deep breath. "Pete and I broke up when Ya was about a month old," I said, though we had technically broken up several times—but why go into the details now? Anyway, she already knew about the first time. It had happened before I even got pregnant. In fact, she knew by now that Pete and I had moved back in together briefly because of the pregnancy.

"Figures," she said quietly.

"It was better that way," I said.

"Yeah, I know." She looked stricken, but she rested her hand on her belly. "Ya? That's a nice name."

"Thanks. But David and I are pretty much the only ones who use it now. He goes by "Ian" to his friends. At some point he decided that Ya didn't fit him—or maybe his friends decided."

Tears welled up in her eyes, but she sniffed them back. I waited in the stillness.

I had changed the spelling of Ya's name from "Iah" early on, because people had so much trouble figuring it out. She knew already, of course, that it was the name of an Egyptian Moon God—her favorite class her first semester had been that World Mythologies class. But she couldn't have known that he would be born with the full moon, which was how his father and I stopped arguing, finally, about his name.

After a few minutes, she smiled.

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OK, FINE. SHE DIDN'T SNIFF THEM BACK. The tears. She started sobbing dramatically and already I'm getting fed up. I want to yell at her to shut up, to think about someone besides her own selfish self for once, but I take her hand and try to pat it sympathetically until she finally stops. She is, after all, only a kid.

I feel like I'm trespassing. Should I prophesy for her? Warn her? I already know that each of her children will cost her a tooth. Should I tell her that in three years she will meet the love of her life, but that she will almost spoil everything with her clinging and crying, her stupid jealousies? That she will go through a baptism of fire and emerge, finally, raw and broken, but with the seeds of sanity that would grow slowly? Would she listen? Would it matter? Seeds of sanity—that sounds like something she would say.

She finally stops crying and she asks me again about Ya's name. She really did like it; it seemed to give her some peace and assurance, so I tell her about the time when he was not yet Ian, maybe 9 years old, and we were outside looking at a bright moon in the dark sky, and he said, "Hey, thank you for naming me after that cool guy up there."

She and I smile at the story, and I don't tell her that he denies ever saying that now. He puts up with me calling him Ya and that's enough. He can be Ian to the rest of the world.

She asks about the other boys, and I tell her about the sweet temper of Evan, our baby—not really a baby at all anymore in the third grade, though we all call him that sometimes—and about Duncan with the red hair, our rebel, who got detention at school for refusing to say the Pledge of Allegiance. And she seems proud of that, but I catch myself inwardly cringing. She probably thinks I'm a sellout for sending him to a school where they would even say the Pledge or have detentions. But in actual fact, she probably hasn't yet thought that far ahead. She still thinks she's going to put her baby in a backpack when he is born, and take him to classes. She really thinks this, and I don't have the heart, at the moment, to disabuse her of this notion.

Still, I wish I could stop editing my life for her, just be up front and unapologetic about it. Why, for instance, did I offer her tea instead of coffee? Every morning I drink my two cups before I cut myself off, and substituting tea for my second cup wasn't doing it for me. I was flirting with a headache, but I was afraid she would object on dietary or political grounds. Still, maybe I am not giving her enough credit. Sure, she's a vegetarian, and she won't give that baby any white sugar until he's 2 years old, which, now that I think about it, is a pretty good idea. I wish I'd done that with Duncan and Evan, but it's too late now. But she's not going to be rude about the coffee, is she? Then I flash on her asking for a cheese sandwich at Nature's Table, and when they bring it to her, asking whether they used the same knife to cut her cheese as they use to slice ham, and I cringe. It's a dang good thing there weren't any vegans back then. She would probably have joined PETA.

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OK. I'M NOT STUPID. I've read good fiction and bad fiction. I know this is a huge cliché—a stilted, unlikely device. And I'd be crazy to ask anyone to suspend anything to listen to my story. I think for a moment about passing my hand through her body, which should dissipate like a Hollywood ghost. Did she form from the mist she walked out of this morning? I reach for her, but my hand touches her shoulder. It is warm. She is sobbing again. What are you going to do? I pat her shoulder.

"It's ok," I say. "It's going to be ok."

I am struck by how much she looks like my mother one instant, my sisters the next. It is strange to see her from this angle—an old photograph come to life.

"It doesn't even look like the same place," she says, and I am swept back 20 years. I remember how the farm looked then: broken, dejected; 3 different layers of siding in various colors and on various parts of the house; the granary about to collapse; piles of junk scattered in the tall grass. We have done a lot of work on the place.

I glance down at our teacups where we are both warming our hands—mine have grown plump as rising bread, hers still slender and youthful. She takes my left hand, and for a second I think she is looking at my wedding ring, but she pulls at my middle finger and touches the scar I got when I was seven. More than a scar, really. A chunk cut out from the corner by the top of my fingernail. Then she smiles and shows me her identical scar.

And I think again that I must be crazy. But that doesn't change the fact of her presence at my table on a foggy winter day. Sitting there, I realize that I've got a weak hold on my emotions and abruptly I'm pissed again. Who does she think she is?

"WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?" I say, and she flinches, but then gathering something (Courage? Strength? Audacity?) she answers.

"You know who I am."

And I guess I do, or at least, if I don't, nobody does.

"But what are you doing here?"

"You tell me."

And I try to remember anything that would lead her out to the farm. I should have a memory of this meeting, but there is nothing. Is it even real? Is it a dream? Hers or mine? How would she even get out here? She doesn't have a car. Did she come to visit Grandma and find me instead?

She is staring at me, searching for something, and now I see how strange this encounter is for her, too. She looks scared, and I realize that she's never thought this far ahead before—not even enough imagination to look at Mom and think about what she'll be like at age thirty, forty, fifty. But then I realize that her mother is still younger than I am today. This whole scene is weird—awkward. She is still staring at me, and I cast about for something to fill the clumsiness of the moment.

***

IN THE END WE SAT AND KNITTED TOGETHER. She pulls some needles and a half-finished bootie out of her bag. The yarn is variegated, blue and eggshell colored—navy blue, not baby blue. I go to the attic and dig around until I find half a skein of wool in exactly the same color. She patiently shows me the pattern, and I knit the other bootie to match hers. We fill the afternoon with idle talk. I feed her soup, and now it is dusk, and

she is about to leave. Evan will be home from his piano lesson soon, and then David will come.

She says she has to go, and I believe her. I walk her out the kitchen door. The fog of the morning has dissipated. The moon shines, bouncing off the snow, giving the yard a gentle glow. I want to offer her some wisdom, but it comes out sounding bossy.

"You need to start taking better care of your teeth now. Start flossing. And keep taking vitamins even after the baby is born. B complex is good for carpal tunnel. Don't be so obsessed with email. All that typing is hard on your hands."

"What are you talking about? What kind of mail? I don't even have a typewriter."

"And eat some vegetables once in a while."

"I'm a vegetaria—"

"Yeah, yeah. You don't eat meat, but you don't eat many vegetables either. All you eat is cheese and bread and peanut butter. Eat something green once in a while or you'll end up fat and arthritic," I say. "Plus, you won't fart so much."

"I don't fart that much." She turns to go.

"One more thing." I touch her shoulder. "You've got to forgive Penny. She doesn't act like it, but she does love you."

She turns back. "Penny?" She scrunches up her brow. "I'm not mad at Penny."

"Yeah, I know. You will be, though," I say. "And don't frown like that. It gives you wrinkles on your forehead."

"Oh, don't be so self-centered," she says, and I smile.

She looks around the yard. "You could use some chickens around here. Maybe a goat."

"Yeah." And then I don't want her to go. I want to tell her more. To be nicer to David when she meets him. To quit being so judgmental about Mom all the time. That the kids will learn how to treat their own mother by watching how she treats hers. But the moon slips behind the cloud, and as quick as that, the yard darkens. Her black hat and coat were swallowed up in the dimness, and now her face is all I can see. The cloud passes and the moon glows on the snow once again, but she has disappeared into the night.

END

THREE RAFTS ON A TROUBLED RIVER

1975

BECAUSE THIS CAMPING TRIP MAY BE HER LAST CHANCE TO WIN KEVIN BACK, Norma Harris has carefully planned who will be in each boat. She will take Penny, the baby, with her. She still thinks of her five-year-old as "the baby," still carries her on her hip—all thirty-eight pounds of her—whenever Penny whines about walking. Ruth and Hannah will go together. Hannah is young, too, only nine, but Ruth, at fourteen is responsible. Norma thinks of her as a little mother. Joey will ride with Kevin. Norma thinks that half of Joey's issues stem from not enough time with his father, so she casually throws them together whenever she can, suggesting, for example, that Kevin take Joey when he goes out for Sunday morning coffee. When Ruth was younger, she would demand to go, too, saying it's not fair, because she's the oldest, so why does Joey get special treatment? Norma was fine with that, since Joey's *issues* are only part of the reason she wants Kevin to take the kids to coffee.

Norma doesn't want to admit, even inside her own head, that she wants to make sure Kevin isn't meeting *her*. More often now, Kevin stomps out alone, using the kids' bickering as an excuse to leave in anger, but once in a while he'll still take the two oldest. Norma imagines them sitting silently across from him in a booth at the diner, while he reads the paper and smokes. But today, while Norma lists out the plan for the lunch she is packing, Kevin just nods, watching the raft inflate. She'll work up to the seating arrangements later. He isn't looking at Norma, but at his own foot. He is using a foot

pedal to inflate the rubber rafts, and his knee is bouncing up and down, and the pump is squeaking. Kevin has unfolded the first raft on the packed dust in front of the tents, and it rises slowly as it inflates. They have bought these rafts for this camping trip, which will include a day trip down the river.

Norma is standing at the picnic table making sandwiches, peanut butter and jelly for Penny, and tuna fish salad for everyone else. She brushes aside any worry of salmonella. She's a sport, Norma is. Not every woman likes camping. Not *her*, that's for sure. Norma doesn't know much about her, but she knows that much. Norma and Kevin used to joke about how trailer camping was not real camping. "What's the point of camping," Kevin would say, "if you bring your bed and plug in your little television?" And Norma would agree, laughing. "How is that *getting away from it all*?" The sunset and the canopy of leaves overhead, the geese on the lake—all that was enough for her. Norma imagines that *she* is someone who would bring a television in her trailer. She might have one of those roll out AstroTurf yards so she can set her lawn chairs out and watch the wildlife from there. *She* is someone who wouldn't want to go on a hike, because bugs might fall out of the trees and crawl on her. Norma knows her name, now—Julie—but doesn't like to say it, or even think it. Norma is feeling more and more satisfaction as she spreads the sandwiches and wraps them in waxed paper.

The river is down the road a little from the campsite, and a breeze brings an earthy smell and the sounds of water. Birds chatter, and across the way, on the other side of the road, the occasional goose beats its wings.

Norma looks up and sees Ruth kneeling, arranging the firewood. In the old days, Kevin would have organized the kids in a search for different sizes of sticks for starting

and feeding the fire. “Okay, gang. We have plenty of the big stuff; we need more tinder and kindling.” They would run to him with twigs and branches so he could classify them: tinder, kindling, or fuel. But today, Kevin is pretty much ignoring the kids. The squeak of the foot pump is getting on Norma’s nerves.

Penny and Hannah are across the road at the camp playground. Penny is in the center of the merry-go-round, and Hannah is pushing it, first just shoving each bar with her hands as it passes, then holding a bar and running as fast as she can along the side, and finally jumping on. Both girls start screaming and Norma can't tell whether Penny is crying or squealing with delight. “Go check on your sisters,” she tells Ruth.

Ruth looks up from the firewood, but Kevin has already answered for her. “They're fine, Norma. Let them play.” The first raft is now as fat as a sausage, and he stops with his squeaking pump and closes off the valve. He tosses the first raft into the dust and unfolds the second. Norma goes back to wrapping sandwiches.

Joey has been watching the geese on the lake across the road, and now he comes back to tell them about it. “They have nine baby geese.”

Ruth looks up again from her piles. “Goslings.”

“Well there’s nine babies, but two moms and a dad—or two dads and a mom. I can’t tell which.”

Ruth says, “Geese mate for life.”

“That’s a myth,” Joey says.

“How do *you* know?”

“I read it in a science magazine. They did a paternity test.”

But Ruth is not convinced. “A paternity test on an egg?” Sometimes Joey makes things up.

“Not on the egg, *dummard*, on the baby geese.”

“That's enough, you two. Stop your bickering. Now.” Norma is rearranging the ice packs in the small cooler, trying to fit all the sandwiches. She glances at Kevin for backup, but he has started on the second rubber raft, furiously pumping, and it seems that the raft needs all of his concentration. He stares fiercely at the little, limp boat, and Norma glances back at the kids. Where did they even hear about paternity tests? Joey usually targets the little girls for his harassment. He rarely gets the best of Ruth, but Norma thought she'd better nip it in the bud anyway. She thinks again what a good idea to put Joey in the boat with Kevin.

“Honey? Kevin?” Norma tilts her head and places a strand of her short, brown hair behind her ear. “I thought Ruth and Hannah could go in the boat together. I could take Penny, and you can take Joey.”

And now Kevin looks at her for the first time this morning, and even stops his stomping pump. “Why don't I take Hannah? Ruth and Joey are old enough to go together.”

Norma looks at him, pleading silently. She doesn't want to say in front of the kids that a boy needs his father even more than the girls do; that she just wants them all to remember how to be a peaceful, fun, loving family again; that today may very well be their last hope. She shouldn’t even have to tell him this. Kevin knows as well as she does. Norma holds his gaze for a moment, but he sighs and goes back to his pumping.

“Fine. I'll go with Joe.”

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KEVIN KNOWS WHY NORMA WANTS HIM TO TAKE JOEY IN HIS RAFT. Of course he does. She is always pushing Joey on him, but the more she pushes, the more of a mama's boy he becomes, and an angry one at that. Kevin just wants him to be independent. Joey would be all right, Kevin knows, if he could just stand up for himself and get some confidence. Or maybe not confidence, exactly; he is plenty confident when he bullies the two little girls. Kevin wishes he could figure his son out, but Norma isn't helping matters the way she has to direct everything. *Christ*, his leg is getting tired from blowing up these rafts.

Kevin wishes he could get his feelings straight about Norma and Julie. Norma has a heaviness to her. Not just the weight she has gained, but she drags him down emotionally. Every time he feels like he could get ahead a little bit, buy that little sailboat from George, for example, Norma reminds him of unpaid bills and work that needs to be done on the car or the furnace. Norma thinks he's irresponsible. Hell, he wonders why she didn't pitch a fit over these little rafts. A couple of canoes would have been better, but they were more expensive, even if he only bought two of them. Julie never complains about money—never even talks about it. Kevin doesn't mind when Jules calls him at the office. Even when she can't talk because her boss is near, just a few seconds of her breathless, teasing voice is enough to get him going. When Norma calls, it is all about whether he'll be home for dinner, and could he pick up some potatoes or ketchup or soap or lettuce or some damned thing.

He loves Norma, of course. She is the mother of his children. And he wishes he could divide his life into separate rooms and keep everything in order. His job, his kids,

his wife, Jules. The problem is, nobody stays in their place. Even Julie will call him at the house despite his pleading logic. Every time the phone rings, it feels like an emergency—a fire alarm or a siren—and he gets worked up and tries to beat Ruth to answer it. But just try to beat a teenager to the phone. And he feels panic if it is Julie and disappointment if it isn't, so that his heart pounds in his chest either way for a while. And then Norma gives him her look.

That Saturday last summer when George invited him to take out the little sailboat on the lake to try it, he thought about bringing Norma and the kids, making a picnic of it. But just as he was about to mention it, he sensed her disapproval and told her instead that he needed to go to the office to work on some briefs that were due on Monday. Then he drove to Julie's apartment and knocked on her door. He had memorized her address from the paperwork after comforting her in his office—comfort that went just a little beyond a soothing pat on the back and the offer of a tissue while she pulled herself together. Nothing had really happened, and when he knocked on her door that day she looked surprised, but not too surprised. She listened to his invitation, then simply packed a bag with a swimsuit, sunscreen, towels, and a bottle of wine. No complications.

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FRANK MURATTA DRIVES THE FOREST PRESERVE TRUCK AT A CRAWL along the winding road of the campground. He is checking the paperwork at each campsite, making sure everyone in the little county park is registered. He has just talked to a couple of scruffy guys whose form posted a day-old departure date. Their story was that they'd decided last night to stay an extra day, and he gave them until noon to walk up to the little white house by the entrance where he lived with his wife, Betty, so they could pay for

last night and tonight. Their site was a mess, their table littered with bottles and paper plates with what looked to be last night's supper. He would be back later to make sure those weren't beer bottles.

The next campsite is the Harrises. Good. Betty told him they had come in yesterday afternoon. The Harrises come every summer, and Frank had gotten to know Kevin a bit better last year when he had to run off some teenagers who had pitched tents back in the woods where they weren't supposed to camp. They'd had pot, too, and since Kevin works for the State's Attorney's office, he knew all the sheriff's deputies who had come, and had been a big help. And now, here is Kevin blowing up some rubber rafts, and here is his pretty wife at the picnic table. She has let herself go—a little more plump than he remembered—but still pretty enough. She has an open, inquisitive face, like an otter. Kevin is bent toward his son and speaking in a low voice, his hand on the boy's shoulder. The boy—Jimmy? Johnny?—has long, tangled hair, and it takes Frank a moment to figure out he isn't one of the girls. Not just the long hair, but the way he is standing, hip jutted out, arms crossed. Kevin hasn't noticed Frank's truck yet. Frank will have a little fun. He sticks his elbow out the window and leans out.

"Do you have permits for your watercraft, sir?"

Kevin's head shoots up like he's been caught stealing cookies. His face freezes for a second, and then he breaks into a laugh, dropping his hand from the boy's shoulder and coming toward the truck.

Frank opens the door and swings out, and the two men shake hands.

"You're late this year," Frank says. "We usually look for you in mid-June, don't we?"

"Busy at work this summer. Too busy to take much of a break."

For the last several years the Harrises have come out, pitching tents to camp for several weeks. Norma always stays at the park with the kids while Kevin works all week, and then he joins the family on weekends. They bring a big footlocker full of canned goods and pots and pans, and set up a screen tent over the picnic table. Frank lets them hang a couple of hammocks, though he might not let just anyone do that.

"No kitchen tent this year?"

"We're only here for the weekend."

Kevin tells Frank about the plan to take the little boats down the river about five miles. Kevin's brother will drop their station wagon off at Bridge Street in town. They'll take a picnic lunch and drive back to camp before dinner.

"You have enough life jackets for all the kids?"

"Oh, come on, Frank. You know me."

Frank chuckles. He knows well enough that Kevin would have thought of that. One reason Frank likes him is that he follows the rules.

"Well, have a good trip, then." Frank swings back into the pick-up and waves at Norma as he continues on his rounds. He glances up at the sky—a fresh, cloudless blue. Rain was supposed to come in, but not until sunset.

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RUTH HAS BEEN WAITING FOR ALL THE RAFTS TO BE INFLATED, and now they are bringing them down to the river. She and Hannah swing theirs between them as they walk, each holding a handle. Ruth is a head taller than Hannah, and so their boat hangs a bit crooked between them. The rafts are identical: a sunny yellow with blue markings.

They all say "Challenger," the brand, but Ruth's father said the boats each needed their own names, which he wrote on the bows in big block letters with a grease pencil. Joey wanted to name his boat *Peter Pan*, but his father said that boats always had girls' names, and called theirs *The Sangamon Queen* instead. Penny wanted a princess name for hers, and her mother thought of *Ariel*, the mermaid princess. Ruth and Hannah's boat was *Silver Girl.*

Ruth's mother is telling them the order of the boats. She will go first with Penny, then Ruth and Hannah. Their father and Joey will bring up the rear. Ruth watches as Penny climbs into the boat while it's still on shore. She sits cross-legged on the board seat in the back of the boat, and Norma pushes the boat out a little and turns it, stepping heavily into it. The boat rocks wildly as she fits the oars into the oarlocks, and then it steadies. Norma paddles against the current, holding it back. "Let's go, guys."

***

THE RIVER BENDS THIS WAY AND THAT. It's so different, Norma thinks, from driving, or even hiking in the woods. The earth passes at eye level. Here is an empty hole in the bank and Norma looks for the muskrat. You see people's back yards, rough docks, rowboats lashed to them, sometimes junk—old driers, lawn mowers—rusting in the yards. Norma keeps ahead of her clan. She can trust Kevin to watch over the girls in their boat. She only has to worry about Penny, quiet for the moment, though she was singing earlier. Norma has turned around to paddle front-wise with only one paddle, stroking first on one side, then the other, like a canoe. The seat is a little awkward, but this way she can see where she's going. They round the bend and a great blue heron stands, fishing in the shallows near the bank. It lifts off silently, flying up over the trees downriver. "Look,

honey. Did you see that bird?" Norma whispers loudly over her shoulder, but Penny is leaning over the side just a little to look into the river. She pulls her face up, away from the water to look at Norma, and shakes her head—which rocks the boat gently—but then looks forward to where her mother is pointing.

But the bird has gone, and Norma paddles on. She is determined to think only about the river today. This is their last chance. Their new beginning. She will elicit from Kevin a promise to break it off with *her*, but first Norma has to show him how she can keep everything under control. Her crying. He hates her crying. Only now, just like that, she is not on the river, but walking into the kitchen, and Kevin has just hung up the phone and stepped back into the laundry room. She has heard the soft metallic shuffle of the receiver settling on its hook. She sees the yellow cord swinging as he slips out of her sight. And just like that, the lovely river falls away and she feels the anger rise up in her again. She plunges her paddle into the water and watches the tiny whirlpool it makes as she strokes.

Penny's voice pulls her out: "Mama, there's the big bird!"

Norma glances up, and there is the heron again. Now there are two of them. Again, in the same instant they spread their wings and lift from the water with great, plowing strokes that take them up over the trees, downriver.

And now she hears a laughing shout from behind and turns to see Ruth and Hannah gaining on her in their boat. Ruth is rowing, oars flashing in the oarlocks. She has not turned around to see where she is going on the river, and Hannah is guiding her, pointing.

"Go that way. You're going to ram into Mom and Penny."

The girls pull ahead in their boat, and Norma sees Ruth's determined smirk. Hannah throws back her head and laughs. "We're winning. Keep rowing, Ruth, *Silver Girl* is winning." And Norma feels her daughters get sucked into the vortex of her anger. She can barely control her rage.

"Girls, slow down. You're supposed to stay behind me."

"We'll meet you at the bridge," Ruth leans forward to pull even harder.

"No. Wait for me. This is not a race. You're not even *looking* at the river." Oh, Norma was breathing hard. Now she sees that Ruth is wearing the blouse Norma helped her make. It is a loose, short sleeved tunic that falls midway down her thigh. The white cotton eyelet fabric will stain. "Why the hell are you wearing that on the river? Why did you even bring it camping?"

"*God*, Mother. Don't be so controlling," Ruth says, as their boat rounds the next bend and pulls out of Norma's sight.

Norma hates when Ruth called her "Mother," which she started about a year ago, using the word to show her annoyance. In that moment, Norma forgets to be a good mother. *Little bitch*, she thinks, stroking hard with her paddle.

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FRANK MURRATA IS ON A RECONNAISSANCE MISSION. He has just come back from his lunch. Betty has tomato soup and ham on rye ready for him every day. Usually he'll walk a trail or two, checking for illicit campfires and pulling downed branches out of the way, noting where he might need to come back with a chain saw or brush cutter. But today he wants to visit those boys at site 21. He just has a feeling that they're up to no good. He didn't like their looks.

He parks his truck in the service drive behind the brick shower building and walks back towards the boys' site. He passes the Harris camp, but they are gone on their excursion. He wants to take those boys by surprise, but from here he doesn't see anyone in their camp. Their table is still a mess, but the bottles are gone. The trash barrel for this section of the campground is between the boys' site and the Harrises'. Frank peeks in and doesn't see any glass in the barrel. He pictures those boys again, the wiry one with greasy long hair down past his shoulders and bad posture. The tubby one—the one who spoke up this morning—had an anchor tattoo on his upper arm, a pack of cigarettes rolled up in the sleeve of his dirty t-shirt. Frank had seen their kind before, all toothy grin to your face, but you can't believe a word they say. They hadn't come by his noon deadline to pay, and he knew they'd have a new story about why not when he found them again.

Now he uses his authoritative voice: "Good afternoon." He directs this greeting into the campsite and even into the woods beyond, but nobody answers. Frank walks back behind their pup tent. "Bingo," he says. He kicks the pile of brown bottles and notes the blue star on the labels. He takes one for evidence.

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SILVER GIRL HAS PULLED AHEAD, LEAVING THE FAMILY BEHIND.

Ruth and Hannah are giddy with freedom. They sing aloud as they wind with the river through forest and field. They pass a couple of guys fishing from a high bank, and wave. Ruth thinks they look familiar, but can't place them. One is kind of fat, with thinning, curly hair, like an old guy. The other has long hair and is kind of cute in a lean way, if he wasn't smoking. Ruth knows she's supposed to think smoking is cool, but she doesn't. The cute one gets a bite and flicks his cigarette into the water to reel in his line.

The girls sail on down the river and leave those guys behind. The river is moving fast, and Ruth doesn't need to paddle much to keep moving forward.

Around another bend, two big birds stand in the shallow part of the water. They are as tall as Penny, standing there on stilt thin legs, like statues in the river, until the girls' boat is only a few feet away, and then together, responding to a silent signal, they look downstream and spread their giant wings in slow motion to lift out of the water. The birds fly just above the canopy of trees in the direction the river flows.

Around another bend, a stench meets the girls.

"Ew!" Hannah holds her nose. "It looks dead. Is it dead, Ruth?"

Ahead of them floats a half submerged, bloated cow. It looks fake, like the cow statue at the County Fair, but the smell and the flies tell the girls it's real. Ruth feels suddenly ashamed, as if she has accidentally seen something she shouldn't. Surrounding the cow on the surface of the water is a greasy sludge. The cow is under a spinney of trees and the water is black there, and a layer of grease on the surface holds dark colors. Ruth looks away from the cow and silently rows past.

And now they are coming up to a bridge high overhead.

"We won. We won," sings Hannah. Ruth has stopped rowing, and the boat drifts for a bit. She looks up to the bridge above. Cars whiz by overhead, oblivious to the two girls in the boat below. A sandy bank surrounds the cement pillars of the bridge straddling the river, and Ruth guides the little raft to the bank and steps out, tugging the boat up onto the rough sand.

"Get out, Hannah. You're heavy."

Hannah jumps out. "I'm hungry," she says.

“Mom has the lunch.”

“There’s our car,” Hannah points to a maroon station wagon parked up the embankment before the bridge.

“I thought Uncle Joe was meeting us at the bridge,” says Ruth. But Hannah has already started climbing up the rocky steepness toward the car.

Now Ruth wishes they hadn't shot ahead. It will be boring to just sit here and wait for the others. She wants to keep going down the river, and now she has an impulse. “This isn't the right bridge,” she says.

Hannah turns back. She wrinkles up her face. “What?”

Ruth sees it all laid out before her. She heard her father discussing with Uncle Joe where to pick them up. There was another bridge a little further, at Allerton. They will go on to the second bridge and wait for their parents to find them there. Oh, it will be a funny joke. Ruth and Hannah will sit there all composed. “What took you guys so long?” Ruth will ask.

But Hannah is squinting up the hill. “I think—”

“It looks like our car, Hannah, but it's not. We need to find Uncle Joe's car.”

Hannah takes a step up the hill.

“We should get going.” Ruth has pushed the boat back into the water. She is waiting for Hannah to come back.

Hannah is still looking up the hill, her weight shifted forward, ready to climb.

“Are you coming?” Ruth has stepped into the boat. Hannah gives one last long look up the hill, and then comes down and steps into the boat.

***

NOW NORMA IS IN A FUNK. Why the hell did she think this river trip was such a good idea? Her shoulders are aching, and Penny's getting a sunburn. Her skin is so fair. Norma should have brought extra canteens. Penny had already drunk all the water, and she was getting thirsty again. They pass a dock stretching out from somebody's back yard, and she catches a faint scent of cigarette smoke. Two fishing poles are lashed to a railing, the lines dangling in the river, red and white bobbers nodding with the current. Penny is getting on her nerves, but Norma tries to modulate the excitement in her voice.

"We're almost there, honey." Norma doesn't know what time it is; she has left her watch at camp because it isn't waterproof. The sky is beginning to cloud over, so she can't tell where the sun is, even if she could see it through the trees. Once in a while she can hear Kevin and Joey murmur as their boat approaches hers, and she pulls ahead. She doesn't want to explain to Kevin how she has let the girls out of her sight. She only wants to get to the bridge. And just back there—there was that sickening cow. Ugh. She shudders now, remembering. Penny had started wailing when she saw it, and Norma had to calm her down. The smell followed them down the river for quite a ways. The cow was stiff and stunk to high heaven. It was distended and listed to one side, its head stretching up and out of the water. Norma imagined it gave her the evil eye as she passed. But now, up ahead, thank God, is the bridge, high in the sky. Norma doesn't see the girls or their boat. They must have pulled it up high on the bank. There is the car. Maybe they are up there. Norma rows to the shallows and steps out of the boat. She pulls the line, shielding her eyes from the sun as she looks up the hill for the girls.

***

THE RIVER HAS STARTED TO SPREAD OUT. It's wider now, and shallower. Occasionally the rubber bottom scrapes on rocks or sandbars. Ruth is tired of rowing. She thought the next bridge would be closer than this. Now she takes the oars out of the oarlocks and gives one to Hannah. “We'll both row now, like a canoe.” Hannah is still giddy, and now glad to be part of the rowing. She is on an adventure with her big sister. Ruth teaches her the J stroke, and they make good progress for a while, but Ruth has started to get snappish. To tell the truth, Ruth is worried. She stops rowing and just watches the trees go by for a moment as the current carries the boat along.

“Hey,” says Hannah, when the boat begins to slowly turn, and she realizes Ruth isn’t rowing.

“Maybe we should go back,” Ruth says, letting the boat turn all the way around. But though the river doesn’t seem to be going so fast now, rowing upstream is hard. They can barely keep from being pulled backwards with the current. Ruth doesn’t want Hannah to know that she wishes now that they’d just waited on the riverbank for the family.

They turn back upstream, but then the boat bottoms out again. They are six feet from the bank, and they try to push off from the rocky bottom with their oars, but only get another few feet before getting stuck again. Ruth takes off her shoes and socks and wades to the shore, pulling Hannah in the boat.

“Hand me my shoes.” Ruth reaches out, and Hannah tosses them to her one at a time, and then climbs out herself. Both girls take off their life jackets and toss them in the boat with the oars.

“We'll walk along the bank and pull our boat until it gets deeper again.”

And that works for a while. Ruth has brightened. She is listening to the birdsong. She points out Mayapples growing in a colony on the forest floor, like a lot of green beach umbrellas. She sees a Shagbark Hickory tree and shows Hannah the remains of last season's nuts on the ground, all cracked open and bleached white. She feels happy and protective, passing on knowledge to her little sister. But soon the riverbank gets steep and full of brambles. The river is still shallow. Worse than that, it's starting to rain—just a little—but enough to soak their clothes, and they're getting chilly. The sky has darkened, and Ruth is not sure if it's just from the clouds or if it's really that late. She has no idea how long it's been since they passed that sunny bridge. Ruth makes a decision.

"We're going to have to go up from the river and try to find a road. We can't drag the boat through the woods. We'll tie it up here."

Hannah is suddenly panicked. "No! We can't leave our boat."

"Hannah, listen. It's just a boat."

But Hannah has started a high-pitched howl that pierces the dusky rain and lifts up over the trees. She is crying so hard now that her words are garbled. "It's not just a boat. It's *Silver Girl.*"

"Okay, okay," says Ruth. She grabs Hannah, and feels how her shirt is wet through, and her skin is cold. And now for the first time Ruth understands she has put her sister in danger. She has to get her out of this rain, and she thinks she will do or say anything to get Hannah to stop crying and walk up the hill with her. "How about this? We'll just let it go. It will float downstream, and Mom and Dad will find it and bring it home."

Hannah nods and tries to calm her hiccupping sobs. Ruth takes the boat to the river and lets it go, then takes her sister by the hand and turns away from the bank.

***

NORMA IS STILL TRYING TO QUELL HER RISING PANIC WHEN KEVIN ARRIVES. She has pulled her boat up to the car and unpacked Penny's peanut butter sandwich. Penny is sitting in the shade, eating.

Kevin is holding the boat steady for Joey to step out, and Norma doesn't even wait for him to finish helping Joey.

“Have you seen the girls?”

“Weren't they right behind you?”

“I let them—” she shakes her head. “They passed me up.”

“They probably just went up to the car.”

“I already looked.”

“Oh for Christ's sake.”

Norma can't believe how wrong things have gone. Kevin is looking at her like she’s ruined everything, and she probably has. All of her dreams have been dashed.

But Kevin’s good. He really is. He doesn't panic. He knows just what to do. He tells Norma to wait on the bank. Maybe they pulled out of the river to rest and got behind them all again. They could still show up. He runs up the hill, but then jogs back down. She thinks he has forgotten something. His keys? But he is coming towards her.

“Nori,” he places his hand on her cheek. “Try not to worry, huh? Give Joey one of those sandwiches.”

Nori. He has not called her "Nori" in two years. And now Norma feels confusion churn up in her chest. The worry mixed with his sudden gentleness almost overpowers her, but she just nods mutely, and Kevin runs back up the hill and gets in the car to drive away.

***

FRANK MURATTA IS TROLLING THE RIVER IN HIS ALUMINUM WATERCOURSE DINGHY, and he doesn't like the looks of things. When Kevin Harris showed up at the house, Betty radioed him, which she rarely does. Two of Kevin's girls were lost on the river, and Frank can't quite understand how it happened, how they got away from the rest of the family, but he has called in the sheriff's deputies and rounded up some volunteers to search up and down the banks of the river. And now they have found the empty boat. The river is not deep, but it runs fast in some places, and a raft was upside-down in the shallows, a couple of miles downstream from the bridge where the girls should have gotten off. Then someone found one of the life jackets. Frank will need to double back and find Kevin, who is searching the bank on foot with his brother, downriver. Frank wants to make sure the raft is theirs, but the description matched the others. For some reason Frank thinks about those two characters camping next to the Harrises. He doesn't want to leave the river, and there was no real reason to think they were anywhere near, but he knows they weren't at their campsite when the family embarked. He's a little past the bridge, thinking that the girls have to be upstream from where their boat was found. Frank knows that his instinct is good; he's proven it again and again. In twenty-four years as a forest preserve ranger you run into a lot of shady characters. He'd like to get ahold of

those boys. He is motoring slowly down the river, scanning the banks on each side, calling their names into the forest: "Ruth! Hannah!"

Now his radio crackles. One of the deputies has just found two men fishing without permission off of the Barretts' dock. They say they saw the girls go by a few hours ago. *We'll see about that*, Frank thinks, turning up his motor. He knows the Barretts' place well. It was just a little downstream from where he was. We'll see what those boys have to say for themselves. Oh, Frank will make them sorry.

***

KEVIN AND HIS BROTHER, JOE, HAVE SPLIT UP, hiking and calling on opposite banks of the river. Joe's side is easier going, and he's covering more ground than Kevin. Kevin scrambles up and down the rough bank, keeping his eyes on the shallows. The river has spread out here, and he can see where rock and sand and rusted junk could have scraped holes even in the tough rubber. He never should have taken his family out on this river. Joe is out of sight now, but Kevin can still hear his rasping voice, hoarse from all the yelling, and Kevin is now aware of his own gravelly shout. His throat is scratchy—hurts even—but he goes on yelling for his daughters. Ruth is levelheaded. She knows how to handle herself in the woods. *They'll be okay*, he tells himself. *They'll be okay*.

***

NORMA IS SITTING IN THE DARK on her in-laws' front porch with Joey and Penny. Her mother-in-law has fixed them each plates with hamburgers and coleslaw, but Norma can't eat. Kevin has gone with his father and his brother, Joe, to look for the girls, and Mrs. Harris is somewhere in the house. The two women have never been close. After fifteen years, Norma still calls her Mrs. Harris—mostly because Mrs. Harris has never

invited her to use another name. She makes Norma feel both shy and stupid. Mrs. Harris reads all the time and has little to say. Norma has never seen her show any warmth or affection to anyone. Kevin thinks the world of her.

Norma once again feels stupid and useless. She knows that someone has to stay with the kids. She knows she would be no good on the search. She can barely keep hysteria at bay here on the porch. What help would she be in the woods or on the river? But still.

Norma stands up and walks to the edge of the porch, peering into the dark drizzle. The moon is big, but mostly obscured by the cloud cover. Once in a while a space opens up in the cloudbank, and the yard is illuminated for a second or two. A possum scuttles past on its way to the chicken coop, and then the yard darkens again.

Now she realizes that the kids have been bickering. She hasn't been listening, but Penny is crying. What is Joey saying?

"They'll have to wait until they find the bodies to have the funeral."

Norma turns, savage. "For God's sake, Joey. Shut the hell up."

Joey is stone still. Penny runs to Norma, clinging to her leg and weeping.

***

KEVIN HAS TO USE HIS FLASHLIGHT to get back to the trail that leads to the bait shop, where he knows a deputy sits with his clipboard, managing the searchers and checking in with the sheriff. The sun wasn't supposed to set until after eight, but the rain has come, and clouds have darkened the sky, only blowing aside occasionally to show bright patches. Kevin can't remember when he lost track of his brother, Joe, but he'd run into others who had joined the search. He is scratched and bitten, and the brambles have

torn into his sunburnt skin. The rain has soaked his clothes, and the mud smell of the river bottom is beginning to wear on him. A thick phlegm has formed in the back of his throat. He had emptied his canteen long ago. As he clambers up the trail, the night sounds of crickets and frogs and locusts rise to a high-pitched buzz, so that he wonders whether he could hear Hannah and Ruth if they answered his calls. The trailhead opens into a meadow with a little dammed up lake for fishing. Kevin pauses for a moment at the edge, letting the exhaustion seep into his worry. The scraps of sky between the clouds show that darkness is falling.

He shouldn't have called Jules. The last time he went to check in at the bait shop he had called Norma first, with nothing to report, then turned back to the phone, rattling the change in his pocket, to make another quick call. Julie had already heard about the missing girls on the news. He gave her the number of the bait shop phone booth. Calling Jules is sure to come back on him, but he had felt a strong need, in his panic, to hear her voice. To let her soothe him.

Now, the clouds above are rolling across the sky and the moon hangs for a moment in one of the scraps. It is a silver eyelash suspended in the night. It is both bigger than he could imagine, and impossibly slim. He tries to think if it is waxing or waning, but the cloud slides past, and it disappears, and what does it matter, anyway? Kevin feels a new knowledge growing in him like a chancre. He knows that if anything happens to the girls he would never be able to leave Norma. He feels that awareness rolling around in his belly, and he wants to gut himself like a fish. He has never felt so frightened in his life.

***

RUTH HAS HER ARM AROUND HANNAH, who is shivering in her wet clothes. It is full dark now, but sometimes some light gets through the clouds and the trees. Ruth pushes right through the brambles. She is trying to keep going one direction, thinking they must somehow come out of this timber, but they have zigzagged around thickets, and maybe they're wandering off course. Ruth keeps thinking about her mother. How scared she must be. People can die of fright, Ruth knows, and maybe her mother will have a heart attack while they're looking for them. Or maybe Hannah will die. People can die of exposure and of shock, and Hannah's skin is cold now. She has even stopped crying, just has an occasional choking sob as Ruth pulls her along in the woods. Brambles reach out and grab their clothes, tearing punctuated scratches in their skin. It is all Ruth's fault. She has to fix it. She has to get Hannah to shelter before she dies. She has to let her mother know they're okay, before *she* dies. She has to say she's sorry, so sorry.

Hannah gives a sharp cry and pulls back. At first Ruth tries to continue the forward motion, but Hannah is crying now. "My hair. My hair."

Hannah's hair, already tangled and wet, is caught in a bramble. Ruth works it free. Hannah weeps softly.

"Here. Let me braid you."

Ruth finger-combs Hannah's hair, braids it roughly. She wants a blanket to put around Hannah's shoulders. Ruth is looking down at Hannah's head, braiding more by feel than sight, when Hannah's head snaps up. She is pointing. "A light!"

***

FRANK WATCHES WITH SATISFACTION as the deputy puts those boys in the squad car, even though he knows he doesn't have much to hold them. They've admitted to

drinking in the park, but Kevin said those bottles were not real evidence. Still, they're going to question them in the disappearance of the girls. Frank probably shouldn't have roughed them up.

***

RUTH AND HANNAH ARE RUNNING. They have followed the light out of the wood, and wriggled under a barbed wire fence. They are in a cow pasture and they can see a barn and a house on the other side of the paddock. The light is on a tall pole, illuminating the back yard of a house, and now both girls are giddy. Running has warmed them, and they see the dark shapes of cows.

"Moo!" screams Ruth, the way Kevin used to when they passed cows on a country drive, and Hannah laughs, as they run toward the house, but what now? Who would have thought a bunch of cows would chase them? Here they come, and Ruth is scared again. She keeps behind Hannah, looking over her shoulder. The dark shapes gain on them. Ruth pushes Hannah up over the fence, and she is not sure how she gets over herself, but she does. Ahead is a farmhouse. A bare bulb on the gable illuminates the stoop. Lights are on in the kitchen. Ruth can see cupboards from the window. They are saved. The girls run up to the back door, but then Ruth stops. She doesn't know how late it is, but they've been wandering in the dark for hours. Surely these people will help them, two lost girls? She looks down at her blouse, now muddy and wet. Hannah's braid is crooked, and twigs and thorns are stuck in her hair. Ruth just feels embarrassed. But she steps up on the stoop and knocks at the door.

A woman answers, shouldering a phone and trailing the long, spiraling cord. "Oh my lands. You're here. You're here!" She pulls them quickly inside. "My husband is out

looking for you." She grabs the phone off her shoulder. "Betty! They just knocked at my back door. Radio Frank. Yes." She is nodding. "Yes. I'm sure it's them. Two girls, wet as drowned kittens."

She hangs up the phone and brings them into the kitchen. It is so bright and clean and warm inside. Ruth starts to sit down, but the woman has her wait while she spreads newspapers on the chairs. Then she makes them toast with apple butter. Hannah, who has never tasted apple butter, thinks it is the best thing she ever ate, but Ruth looks down at her fingernails, thinking about how she is too dirty to sit on this woman's kitchen chair.

***

MRS. HARRIS HAS DRIVEN NORMA TO THE DOUGLAS FARM, and Kevin has just arrived a moment before. He is stepping in the door. Norma thinks she has never felt such joy; her daughters are safe, and he called her *Nori*. Now he knows how important family is. Surely he won't leave them now. Norma rushes up the porch steps, and Kevin turns back to see her. Tears spill out—she just can't keep her relief in, but Kevin nods curtly and goes into the house. Norma is a few steps behind him, and they both follow a woman through a parlor into the kitchen. Ruth and Hannah are at the table eating, but when they see their father they run to him. He bends down and grabs them in a hug. His shirt is wet, sticking to his back, and Norma watches as his body shakes in huge, crushing sobs.

Norma steps forward and puts her hand on the back of his neck, but he doesn't respond. The telephone rings, and she can feel Kevin trying to pull himself together. He stands up straight and calms his breathing.

Mrs. Douglas is standing in the middle of the kitchen with the phone in her hand. "Mr. Harris?"

Kevin wipes his face with his hand and takes the phone and speaks into it gruffly. His eyes flick suddenly to Norma then away, and he puts his head down and turns toward the phone on the wall, making a private space in the kitchen. He lowers his voice and Norma hears tenderness in it even as Mrs. Douglas is offering her a cup of tea, offering to make her some toast.

Norma feels her heart clench, and now the girls run to her. She holds them, sobbing into their wet hair, knowing her family is lost. She looks up at Kevin, and he is hanging up the phone, turning back towards her and the girls, but not even looking at them.

"Fuck you, Kevin," she says. "Oh, Jesus. Fuck you."

END

MILK FEVER

1987

RUTH COULDN'T QUITE FORGET THAT HER HUSBAND, DAVID, HAD SLEPT WITH DIANA before he slept with Ruth. Diana had just arrived at the farm from Seattle on her way to Canada. Ruth figured the detour had cost her a day and 600 miles. She caught herself probing for jealous feelings, but decided she was glad to see her old friend. Just now, Diana had rummaged through Ruth's pantry for herbs, and concocted a brew of cayenne, ginger, and comfrey for Ruth, licorice root for herself, and added a splash of whisky to each mug.

"Do you think your breast infection has anything to do with my visit?"

Ruth swallowed a sip of tea as she considered. The tea steamed up into her face and burned the back of her throat. Maybe the cayenne would help her, but she wasn't sure about the whisky. David had wanted her to go to the doctor, but Ruth downplayed it, even though she knew that a breast infection could be dangerous. She had been eating raw garlic with honey all morning, since waking up to find her right breast swollen and hot, as if a quarter she'd plucked from a scorching sidewalk were embedded in her flesh. Ruth told him that letting baby Duncan nurse was the best cure. The doctor would just give her antibiotics, and she didn't want her digestive tract all screwed up.

"I mean, it's awfully suspicious that you get a breast infection the day I arrive. Sometimes—" Diana paused to sip her own tea, then reached for the whisky bottle to add another splash, "—physical ailments reflect what is going on psychically."

"You don't believe that Freudian shit, do you?" David had just come into the kitchen with the last of Diana's bags. "Where do you want this?" He shook an overstuffed duffel.

"Just put it wherever you want me to sleep. But seriously, David, it's not 'Freudian shit.' It's mind-body connections."

Ruth laughed. "Don't listen to him. He's just scared to death someone will call him sentimental."

"Well, I have to keep you in the real world, don't I?" He turned to Diana. "I guess you'll have to sleep on the fold-out couch in the living room. We're putting a bedroom in the attic, but it's not finished yet."

"Yeah, David got sidetracked building a bed up there."

"Hey, it's almost done," David called over his shoulder as he went to put Diana's duffel away.

Beautiful Diana had the bone structure of an Amazon and thick, straight, ink-black hair that she periodically sheared off in a jagged crew cut way before that sort of thing was fashionable. Her skin had a dusky tint, and her long graceful fingers looked like they were fit only for the gentler arts of drawing, flute playing, loving, and anything associated with lamb's wool or velvet. Her face was wide, and she was usually grinning a wild grin, but was sometimes furrowed of brow if she was in doubt or thought. Her voice and her words were as tough as she could cut them. Diana was a wild flower child, and she dressed the part—wearing long skirts with hiking boots, or pink flowered harem pants with a shirt made from muslin rice bags. Whatever she wore it was always threadbare and patched with a crazy quilt of velveteen. Diana dressed to please herself.

Years ago, Ruth, David, and Diana had all lived in the same commune. It was a Victorian house that had been cut up for apartments in the thirties, and then opened back up again when the hippies moved in. They called it "Rainbow House," but sometimes, affectionately, "St. Margaret's," because somebody said Margaret of Cortona was the patron saint of unwed mothers. Diana was pregnant when she moved in, and three other girls were raising babies, one of them birthed on a futon on the living room floor with everyone in the whole house in attendance, singing and holding hands, crying and hugging during the crowning. By the time Diana left Rainbow House, she and David had already had their fling and split up again. She moved to Seattle, still pregnant.

Next it was Ruth who got knocked up with her boyfriend, Pete, who wasn't part of the commune. Ruth had moved out of Rainbow House to live with Pete, but that coupling didn't last much beyond Ya's birth. Ruth and David weren't involved during Rainbow House days, though it could have easily happened in the young, noncommittal ways of hippie communities. It was a big house, and it was hard to keep track sometimes. But that was all ancient history. Ruth and David got together when Ya was three, and now he was six. Their baby, Duncan, was eighteen months old.

Diana's daughter would be—Ruth did a quick calculation in her head—seven? And her younger son would be about four. Ruth had assumed Diana was bringing them, but they weren't in the car when she arrived, and Ruth missed the moment when it would have been natural to ask. She had the perfect opportunity, too, since she had talked up the idea with Ya of playmates visiting, a boy and a girl around his age. He could show them how to climb on the hay in the barn and how to pick mulberries and how to watch quietly while the hummingbirds sipped nectar in the trumpet creeper that was the roof of his

secret, outdoor house under the windmill. When Diana arrived, Ya looked into the car, and then accusingly at Ruth.

"Hey," Ya tugged on Diana's t-shirt. "Where's your kids?" But the question was lost in the flurry of hugs and activity of Diana's entrance.

Ya had run off to sulk, and Ruth was trying and failing here in the kitchen to think of a tactful way to bring it up again.

"Where'd you stash the kids?" asked David, when he came back into the kitchen, and Ruth shot him a look, but he was looking at Diana, who smiled brightly.

"They're staying with their grandmother for a while." She looked down into her hot toddy. "Until I get settled."

David brought a mug over to the table and sat down between the women. "Well, moving is hard on kids. It's better to send for them when you get there. Good idea." Ruth poured tea into his mug, and Diana laughed and added some whisky.

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WHEN RUTH HAD AWAKENED THAT MORNING BEFORE DAWN, FEVERISH with the searing pain in her breast, she knew immediately what the problem was, and after swallowing a spoonful of minced garlic, she went into the boys' bedroom and lay down beside Duncan to nurse. He didn't open his eyes, just his mouth, and began to suck slowly. The infection made nursing hurt, but like a good massage hurts tight muscles. And she knew it was important to get all the milk out.

Ruth closed her eyes, and images of Diana drifted through her mind. Diana driving her school bus house straight across the Plains, wheat fields billowing. *Conestoga wagons were called Prairie Schooners because they were like ships sailing through the*

waves of prairie grasses. Who was saying that? Was it Diana talking about it at Rainbow House before she took off for Seattle? *Diana peeling the dry skin off of a red onion in the kitchen*. Oh, Ruth hadn't thought about Rainbow House for so long. *Diana slow-dancing in the living room with various housemates, one after another: Paul and Ross and Jenny and Jim and….*

***

THE SLANT OF THE SUNLIGHT AND THE TASTE IN HER MOUTH told Ruth that she had managed to relax into another hour of sleep. She lay there for a moment, getting her bearings, then started when she remembered that Diana would arrive today. How had Duncan slipped away without waking her? Ruth was alone in the bed, except for Kali, the kitten, who lay curled up on Ruth's belly, and she could hear David furiously and sloppily scrubbing the living room floor. Ya was up, too, and pestering David with questions about Diana's kids. Ruth could hear Ya's high voice (The girl is taller than me, right? Do they like to play legos? Can I show them my cat?), but couldn't quite make out David's reassuring murmured answers between.

The garlic hadn't cured her yet, and Ruth got up carefully and went to put on the cotton sundress that made her think of her hippie days. Lately, she had taken to wearing jeans and tee shirts, but Ruth had been saving this dress to wear for Diana's visit. It was high-waisted and the skirt was cut full so that it billowed in the wind, and she loved to wear it outside.

By the time Ruth made it to the kitchen, David and the kids had moved on to the bathroom—David was singing his "scrub the potty" song amidst running water and the laughter of the two boys. Ruth brewed some comfrey tea and made her way slowly to the

back yard. Every step was a painful jolt to her swollen breast. After checking for tractors in the neighboring fields, she found a thistle free spot, slipped out of her dress and lay down on her back in the sun. The tea and the sun warmed her, and she realized that she had chosen to come outside not only for the healing sunbath, but also so she could be the first one to greet Diana. She rehearsed how she would walk out, smiling, to meet the car. She thought about the hugging and the kissing and meeting Diana's kids, and how, in the middle of it all, David would hear the racket and dash out wiping his hands on his pants. He would laugh and join in and then they'd all go inside and have tea.

But that's not the way it happened.

Instead, when the dog started barking, Ruth got up painfully and put her dress back on. She cupped her hand under the infected breast to keep it from bouncing and she hurried around the corner of the house.

David came out the door just as Diana stepped out of the car, stretching after her long drive. She wore a greenish, bleach-mottled tee shirt. The sleeves were cut off short and hemmed with big straight stitches of colorful thread. Her shorts had faded red cotton pinstripes, and she wore old Birkenstock sandals. One was repaired with duct tape. Her skin was summer dark, and the hair on her arms and legs had sunned to a tawny brown. Slung around her waist she wore a loosely braided rope of green and gold cord. It tied at her left side and shells and keys and curious silver charms bounced and tinkled at the ends of the cords.

David was already running to embrace Diana. She grabbed him by the sides of his face and kissed him onetwothreefour times on the mouth. Then he kissed her back, and he kissed her again. David and Diana danced a little jig and then were locked in a rocking

bear's hug. Diana saw Ruth approach over David's shoulder. She winked, and Ruth smiled. Diana gave David one last kiss and a lingering hug and then he looked over his shoulder and saw Ruth waiting behind him, and they disentangled themselves.

Diana swung her arms wide open, but the energy had peaked, and the passion was gone. The two women embraced carefully, and Ruth remembered the awkwardness she always felt hugging Diana, at being so much shorter. The top of Ruth's head only reached Diana's chin and she felt like a child. Diana and David were about the same height. Ruth stepped back and asked, "How was your trip?" just as David was saying, "Let me show you around." And then nobody was talking and Ruth felt stupid. But then, just as suddenly, everything seemed okay, and they all went inside to drink tea and hear about Diana's plans for Canada, her life in Seattle, her stormy affairs with men, and the wreck of her latest romance.

***

THE AFTERNOON WAS HEATING UP, AND RUTH'S BREAST STILL HURT. As soon as lunch was over, Ruth took the boys out of the muggy house to play in the shade of the old apple tree. Diana and David came out the kitchen door. Diana was telling a story and emphasizing certain points by poking David on the shoulder. He was laughing.

"Hey," Diana called when she saw Ruth. "This weather is lousy. Is there any place we can go skinny-dipping?"

"Not unless you want to fill that old horse trough with water." Ruth pointed at the galvanized tub under the elm tree. "That's what I do for the kids when it's really hot."

Diana and David came up to where Ruth was standing. They were both smiling. “Well,” said Diana. “We can at least sunbathe, can't we? I'm not used to wearing so many clothes.”

“Sure, I was sitting out back before you got here. I think the sun helps my breast.”

“Great,” Diana grinned. “I'm dying to get nekid.”

Ruth laughed. “Just make sure you get dressed if you hear the dog barking. It might be the neighbors. You're not in the Pacific Northwest, you know.”

“Do you get many visitors?”

David smiled. “Just the Jehovah's Witnesses or the Brethren or the Mormons. I'm sure they'd love to see you nekid. They already think Ruth is the Devil's oldest child. She can't just say she's not interested. She has to go and tell them what she thinks of missionaries.”

Ruth took off her dress and Diana pulled off her shirt. David brought a blanket to sit on and they all started telling stories about Rainbow House.

“Dave was the nicest person I ever went out with,” Diana looked sideways at David.

“Yeah,” Ruth nodded. "Me, too."

“Oh, cut it out you guys. You're making me sick.” David smiled and cut his eyes at Diana.

“No. Really. You were. I can't find anyone as nice as you. I'm ready to give up on men.” Diana pulled up a fistful of grass, and then threw it over her shoulder. “For good.”

“You don’t mean that. You’ll find the right guy.”

“I do, David. I really do.” Diana paused and looked around. “Jeez, I can't believe how conservative you guys are now.”

Ruth and David looked at each other.

Ruth spoke first. “What do you mean?”

“I don't know. I guess your style has changed. Your clothes, your hair. You guys have a couch for Christ’s sake.”

Ruth felt like she’d been slapped. “Well, it was here when we moved in. We didn't—”

“Not just that. Look at Duncan. My kids used to run around without a diaper or anything—even in the yard. And then we lived in the city. Now, here, out on the land, with no neighbors for miles, Duncan has to wear diapers and rubber pants and shorts and shoes and socks.”

“But there are rusty nails all over where we tore down that old chicken coop,” Ruth was crestfallen. “And there's broken glass and locust thorns.”

Diana laughed. “All right. But how come you have those plastic pants on him? Don't you have any biobottoms?”

“Those wool soakers they advertise in the back of *Mothering* magazine for twelve-fifty a pair?”

“'"They're not twelve-fifty. They're maybe six dollars.”

“Well, I can get rubber pants at a garage sale for ten cents apiece. Next time I see biobottoms for that price I'll get a couple of dozen.” Ruth looked sideways at David. She imagined saying to him in the secret language of glances *Look at the mother-of-the-year*

telling us how to dress our kids. But David wasn't looking at Ruth. He was smiling at Diana.

Afternoon wore on to evening, and Ruth was still sore. The pain was spreading from her breast down her arm, and her neck felt stiff. She stretched, but that brought more pain and the muscles in her back tightened between the shoulder blades.

"Do you want me to fix you a place to sleep?" asked Ruth.

Diana yawned. "Sure. Where are you going to put me?"

"You can have the couch if it's not too suburban for you."

David laughed. "Yeah, it even opens into a bed."

"You guys are too much," said Diana.

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THE NEXT DAY THEY WALKED TO THE WOODS TO PICK THE WILD PLUMS. David, Ruth and Diana were taking turns pulling Duncan and Ya in the red wagon.

"What's this you're wearing?" David pointed to the colorful and complicated belt at Diana's waist. "It jingles."

"Oh yeah—I forgot to tell you guys. This is my chastity belt." Diana stopped walking and dropped the wagon handle. She held out the rope that loosely circled her waist. Ruth took it and fingered the objects that dangled at the ends of the cords. There was a shell and an ankh and a silver labris and a jade ring. These were each tied at the end of a different string. And there were some loose strings, too, which were weighted with beads.

"I wear it all the time," Diana went on, "so I don't forget."

Ruth looked at David, and he shrugged ever so slightly, raising his eyebrows.

"Does it work?" she asked Diana.

"I guess so. I haven't slept with anyone for six months."

Ruth let go of the belt and David picked up the wagon handle. The kids jerked backward as the wagon lurched into motion.

***

AFTER THEY PICKED THE PLUMS, RUTH WAS FEELING FEVERISH, and David offered to take the wagon with the kids back by way of the road so Ruth and Diana could take a short cut across the bean field. Diana and Ruth had three white plastic buckets of plums. Diana carried two of them. Sweat trickled down Ruth's back, and she could smell the sun on the fruit and on their bodies. She hoped she could sweat out the infection, walk out the stiffness. She stretched her neck, rotating it from side to side and up and down. Despite the pain in her breast, Ruth was happy walking with Diana in the sun—maybe happy to have her friend to herself for a while—and she talked about her plans for the plums.

Ruth wanted to make plum jelly like her grandmother used to. She pictured the jars sitting on the counter, the sun shining through them. She had some of her grandmother's jelly jars, with a quilted imprint pressed in the glass. She would seal them with paraffin. She was telling the story now about trying last summer to make plum butter with no sugar: "I just pitted those plums and cooked them down for about three days. The thing is, I burnt it—about a gallon. It wasn't burnt too bad, but the smoke made it taste like barbecue sauce. I keep thinking about Grandma's jars filled with red jelly. They should look like jewels or something, but they look like burnt applesauce. So this time I want to make red jelly for Grandma."

“I hope there will be fruit trees where we're going,” said Diana. “We had a couple of apple trees in Washington, when we lived on Lopez Island, but the apples were pretty wormy.”

They beat David back to the house, and Ruth said she'd like to take a nap. She'd been feeling tired all day, but told herself she wanted to spend time with Diana. She pretended not to know that she didn’t trust Diana and David alone together. But now she decided that it was exhausting and ridiculous, this watchdog business. And she was stiff and feverish. The walk had tired her out. Maybe she could sleep a little.

She went into her room and lay down on her back. She tried all her sleep tricks, breathing deeply, systematically relaxing parts of her body, reading, stretching. Finally she got up and looked out the bedroom window.

Diana and David were sitting on the grass. They had taken off their shirts.

Diana was telling a story and gesturing wildly. David sat cross-legged pulling up pieces of grass. He laughed at something she said, and he nodded his head. They looked very comfortable and friendly together.

“It figures,” Ruth said and sat down on the bed. She didn’t know what to do. Her breast was hurting worse. She stood up and looked out the window again. David was gone, and Diana lay on her belly in the sun.

Ruth heard the attic door open and shut, and then heavy steps climbed the attic stairs. Soon she heard alternately the electric saw and hammering, and she knew he was building that bed in the new bedroom. Ruth stretched and closed her eyes.

When she woke two hours later she felt even more feverish. Her neck was stiff, and she had to turn her whole upper body if she wanted to look at something. Her mouth

was stale and dry, and she got up to get a drink of water. Diana and David were in the kitchen. Several pots simmered on the stove, and steam billowed overhead. David was packing plums into a jar and Diana was pulling steamy jam jars out of the boiling water bath with one hand, while she bounced baby Duncan on her hip. She and David were snickering confidentially and didn't look up when Ruth came in.

Ruth walked stiffly to the sink and pulled a glass off of the dish rack. She turned on the cold-water faucet, and David turned toward the sound.

"Oh, hi," he said. "Feel better? Look, Diana showed me how to can plums without sugar or honey or anything. It's a lot easier and you don't use so much gas because you process them fresh without cooking them first. There." He emptied the rest of the plums from the bucket into the jar and screwed the lid on. "That's the last of them. This should keep us in fruit for a while."

Ruth sipped her water and looked at the jars lined up on the counter. The plums had lost their color. They were brown and waterlogged.

"Did you pit them?" she asked.

"Naw—too much work," David turned back to the stove where Diana was lowering that final jar into the boiling water.

"Figures," Ruth said under her breath and walked out of the kitchen.

***

THAT EVENING BEHIND THE MACHINE SHED, RUTH SAT IN A LAWN CHAIR AND LOOKED OUT OVER THE FIELD. Diana and David were lying in the grass, David on his stomach and Diana on her back. They had come out to wait for the deer to graze on the hill beyond the bean field. Sometimes at sunset you could see the deer out there. If they

came out in daylight they usually ran straight across the field without stopping. Then you could only see them if you happened to look up before they were over the ridge or into the woods. But at sunset they were quiet. They'd come out in twos or threes and graze. The sun shining red on their coats would at first highlight them. Then it would dim, but you could stay out and watch until it got too dark to see. The deer wouldn't startle as long as you were quiet. Ruth was the only one looking out past the bean field. And so far there were no deer.

The windmill slowly caught the wind and creaked as it turned. Diana laughed. “I like it here.” She put her hands behind her head.

David sat up and threw a pebble so it bounced off Diana’s belly. “Why don't you stay?”

“Oh sure, where will I sleep? The barn? You can't keep me on that couch; I'll turn into a yuppy-guppy.”

“It’s not a barn. It's a machine shed,” said Ruth. And she shot a sharp look at David, but he was still watching Diana.

“What's the difference?” asked Diana, turning toward Ruth.

“A barn is for animals. It has stalls, and it smells like manure and hay. This is for parking farm machinery. It’s empty inside. Like an airplane hangar.”

“No, really,” David broke in. “We're fixing up the attic so someone can move in. Ruth is always harping about ‘living communally,’ plus it would be good for the kids to live all together.”

Diana shrugged. “I don't want to live in Illinois. It's so flat.” She gestured out toward the field. “And Midwesterners are so narrow-minded. God. I don't know how you

guys can stand it. Why don't you come up to Canada with me? We could buy land together."

Ruth looked out across the bean field. Two deer grazed in the high grass in the meadow. She didn't say anything, and they disappeared over the rise.

After the sun went down, Duncan and Ya chased fireflies until the stars were bright and the fireflies faded. The boys sacked out on a blanket on the lawn, and David carried them in to bed one at a time while Diana gave Ruth a backrub to loosen her neck. Her hands were strong and gentle and warm; and it helped a little, but still Ruth couldn't relax. At eleven thirty they went inside, and Ruth pulled David toward the bedroom.

"Goodnight Diana." Ruth tried to make a show of lingering, but didn't even realize she was tugging on David's hand. "Have good dreams."

As soon as he shut the bedroom door Ruth turned on David. "Look, if you want to live with Diana you're going to have to find somewhere else to do it. This is my family's land."

He stepped back. "What are you talking about?"

"What am I talking about? Why in the world would you invite your old lover to live with us?"

"But she said no."

"But you invited her. Here. To live in my house."

"I thought you wanted someone to live here. I thought that was why we were fixing up the attic."

"But not her. You know that."

He looked at the floor. When he didn't speak, she went on. “So. If you want to live with her, just go ahead. I'm sure she'd love your company in Canada. You can even take that bed you’re building.”

“Oh come on,” he pleaded. “Don't start that again. I don't want to live with her. Are you kidding? She's a lunatic. Her and her crazy kids.”

“Then don't encourage her anymore. OK?”

“I'm sorry, Ruth.”

They undressed and he turned out the light. In bed she lay next to him and soon he was snoring. But she was still awake when the quarter moon came around to shine on her window.

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THE THIRD DAY RUTH WOKE UP STILL FEVERISH, and she wondered if she should give in and see a doctor. Her whole body ached and a stiffness had crept into all of her joints. She felt jaded and old, and she snapped at the kids like a dog grown arthritic and impatient. She was short with David and scrupulously polite to Diana. She waded through the day like it was a swamp she had to cross. And on the other side, the next day, Diana was scheduled to leave.

That evening Ruth sat on the couch with her eyes closed while Diana and David fixed dinner. She didn't say more than she had to the whole evening. And she knew she wasn't much help in getting the kids to bed. Ruth felt like a tortoise—moving slowly, with an urge to pull herself into her shell and shut the door.

After Diana and David had cleaned up the dishes Ruth decided to take a shower. She hoped they had left enough hot water—they seemed to be in the kitchen for an

awfully long time. In the shower she stayed a while, letting the water pound on the back of her neck where she felt the most stiffness. She bent over, the warmth spilling across the base of her spine and she could almost touch her toes after a few minutes. By the time the water began to cool she felt considerably looser. She dried herself and put on her summer robe. When she opened the bathroom door the hall was dark, and she hoped they had already gone to bed. She didn't feel like talking to anybody. And she wanted to lie safely under the sheets with David holding her.

But when she rounded the corner she saw the softly flickering light of candles. Diana lay on her back on the couch, completely naked. She was stroking the kitten, which lay curled up next to her shoulder. The candlelight tossed strange shapes on her body, and she was beautiful. David sat in a chair next to the couch. He still had his clothes on. They were talking in low tones. Ruth stood at the edge of the room for a few seconds before David looked up.

"Did the shower help any?" he asked.

"Not much." Ruth pulled the rocking chair closer to David and sat down.

David turned back to Diana who was talking about her plans to make hammocks for a mail order company when she got to Canada.

Ruth looked at the candles. She thought about all the times she had tried to set the table for a candlelight supper. Always David would grumble that he couldn't see what he was eating, and he'd turn the lights back on. The candles seemed so silly burning under the bright light, so she would blow them out and finish the meal in stony silence. David only consented to candles in the bedroom. And so she associated them with love making, and in that way candlelight had become sacred to her.

Diana was still going on about hammocks and suddenly David interrupted. “Hey. If it’s mail order, why can't you do it here? We have space in the attic and you and Ruth could make hammocks together. Ruth loves doing stuff like that. Don't you, Rue—” He stopped when he saw the look on her face.

No one said anything. Ruth didn't look to see if she was making Diana uncomfortable. She didn't care. When David lowered his eyes Ruth picked up a candle and carried it to the bedroom. She shut the door and set the candle on the chest. Then she threw her robe on the floor, got into bed, and buried herself under the covers. She lay still for a moment before she remembered that stupid chastity belt. Had Diana taken it off with the rest of her clothes? Ruth couldn't be sure. There were too many shadows. She wanted to go back and find out, but it was too late for that. She found that she was shaking.

The door opened and shut, and David sat on the bed.

“Ruth?”

“Just go away,” she answered from beneath the covers.

“Come on—Ruth, listen. I'm sorry.”

“Go on out there. I'm sure she'd take off her chastity belt for you.”

“What? I don't want to sleep with her.”

Ruth looked out from under the summer blanket. David was staring hard at his fingernails.

“Oh no? Then why—” Ruth was shaking now. “Why do you—” Her voice was rising, and her words kept catching in her throat, “ —keep inviting her here to live?”

“"I don't know.” He looked at the floor. “I guess I didn't think you were serious about not wanting her here. She’s your friend. And I thought you'd be a good influence on her.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, shit. She's having a hard time. She keeps getting into messed-up relationships and having kids. And now she seems to have lost them. I guess I've always thought she was a little crazy.”

“But you love her?”

David sighed. “No. I don't love her. I love you.”

“Oh, come on, David. For once can't you be honest? Do you think I'm an idiot? Do you think I can't see how happy you are that she's here? You're practically begging her to—” The door rattled gently and Ruth stopped talking. Did their arguing wake the kids? Did Diana think she should come in here and, what? Apologize? Tell Ruth to stop being such a baby? Ruth waited for the door to open, but it just rattled again, and then she saw the kitten’s white paw reaching under the door up to its elbow. Then the other paw—the dark one—came under, too, both paws reaching in as far as they could groping blindly for something.

In the pause Ruth sobbed, watching the kitten and wondered if Diana was listening. Everything seemed so terrible.

David touched her shoulder, and she turned from the door to look at him. “Ruth, don't cry. Really I—it's you I love.”

Ruth sniffed loudly—God, she hated to cry like this with Diana out there. She sat up and reached over to fumble in the dresser drawer for a handkerchief. She didn't want

to look at David. She blew her nose thoroughly and then, finally, turned to him. He was peering at her. But as soon as she spoke he looked away.

“Look,” she said. “I don't think you're going to leave me for her. I don't even really think you're going to sleep with her. I just want to know if you want to. I just need to know if you love her, and then we won't have to talk about it anymore.”

She looked at him for a long moment, waiting. He pursed his lips and looked at the ceiling, then the floor, then he studied the flickering candle. Finally, he met her gaze for an instant, but his eyes slid immediately away.

“"No,” he said. “You're the only one I love.” Then he looked up at her and smiled like sunshine.

Ruth felt something deflate in her chest, and she saw that he was lying. But then she found that she had been lying, too, since they *would* have to talk about this more. Much more. Ruth lay back down in the bed. She let him cover her with the blanket and kiss her gently on the cheek. Then he pinched the candle with his thumb and forefinger and climbed in beside her in the sudden dark.

END

A Woman Is Wearing Her Prettiest Dress

2008

A WOMAN IS WEARING HER PRETTIEST DRESS, LOOKING INTO THE EYES OF THE MAN WHO ONCE LOVED HER. She kisses him on the cheek, and her life begins to unravel like a sweater.

"Of course, Ruth. Always." Tears form in his eyes.

"David, we should be friends." She stops herself from putting her hand on his cheek.

They are in the parking lot. They are at the courthouse square. They find Courtroom B on the second floor.

The court reporter gives a small wave and a wry smile as the woman and the man back into the courtroom. The court reporter's son is on the soccer team with the son of the woman and the man. The court reporter's eyes glaze over as she pretends not to recognize the mother of her son's teammate. Her fingers fly over the keyboard as she makes a note of every word they will say.

The judge mends the marriage while the woman at the table listens to the man's testimony.

In the court library, they sign so many copies of so many papers. The woman can't read her own writing.

On the first floor of the courthouse, the woman watches her lawyer step backwards up the stairs and then she, herself, backs through the security gate, collecting her cell phone, keys, knitting needles.

She drives home in reverse and takes off her prettiest dress.

For almost a year she works, mothering her sons, making coffee for one, sleeping alone. She carefully dismantles paperwork her lawyer will ask her for.

One day her husband backs up the driveway and says goodbye. His truck is full of his clothes shoved every which way. He walks back and forth between the truck and the house, hanging his clothes carefully in the closet.

The next day the woman says, "David, maybe you would be happier if you lived somewhere else." She doesn't realize she has said this. She only knows how unhappy they both are. She only knows he doesn't sleep at night anymore.

The sun rises in the west and sets in the east, rises in the west and sets in the east, over and over. Colorful leaves rise from the ground and float up to the trees where they turn green. A combine travels back and forth across the field; golden cornstalks rise from the front of the combine. The corn brightens to green and then sinks slowly into the earth. Dead flowers gain color and then shrink back into buds. The earth cools and sucks the leaves of daffodil and iris into the soil. Mounds of snow appear and grow, and then individual flakes float up into the sky until the snow is gone. This happens over and over.

The man begins sleeping at night, holding his wife. They commence to laugh more and more often. They smile at each other. They hold hands. One evening she takes him out to dinner to repay him for bringing her sewing machine from Colorado Springs. This is the beginning and the end of their story.

RUTH IN WINTER

2026

RUTH OPENED HER EYES AND REACHED FOR HER PHONE ON THE BEDSIDE TABLE to check the weather. It was what she did every day now even before getting out of bed.

"Fucking shit. Minus six degrees."

David rolled over and mumbled something.

"What?"

"Do you have to curse so early in the morning?"

Ruth had been cursing more and more this winter. Over the years, she'd been able to stop for long stretches. David had to be pretty angry to curse, and his curses were mild. He would sometimes wince when rough words rolled out of her mouth, and that made her feel thoughtless, so she would try to tame her tongue.

But this winter was endless.

She sat up in bed and could see the grey sky through the window. She shrugged into her robe and sat down to massage cayenne and ginger muscle rub into her left foot. Her big toe was still stiff even—what—two and a half years after her bunion surgery? But the spicy balm warmed and loosened her toe, so it was a little more flexible when she stood up.

The dog sat on her haunches and watched her, waiting. Sasha was a fat little yellow Lab mix and focused on one thing only. Her breakfast. She knew that Ruth would first put on her socks, then pad out to the kitchen to make coffee. Every morning she

would patiently watch Ruth go back and forth between pantry and counter, watch her during the loud grinding sound, but when Sasha heard the water running in the sink, she would tear off to nose the cat from wherever she was sleeping and together they would race to the basement because breakfast was coming next.

While Sasha wolfed her kibble, Ruth slipped into her garden clogs and filled a jug with water for the chickens and grabbed the two metal scoops, then went out to the garage for pellets.

Ruth always wore just her robe out to the chicken coop no matter how cold it was. She would only be out for a minute, but this bitter morning the wind chilled her metal scoop even before she got to the garage, burning her hands. It had been a few weeks since the last big snow, and the ground was bare, barren. The grass had withered and dried to brown wisps, and the soil beneath it showed through like grey stone. She walked carefully, even when there was no ice on the ground. She still remembered falling one morning, almost fifteen years ago now. It was one of those winters when she was alone, the cold years of the separation. Evan was still at home back then, but sleeping in his warm bed, or maybe already off to school that day, Ruth couldn't remember. She did remember hurrying out to the coop because it was so cold, and slamming to the ground that was like a slab of marble. She didn't pass out, but she did see stars and lost her breath and had to lie there for a moment before she was sure she could pick herself up. In that moment she thought of the danger for a woman alone in the icy countryside. Lying there she saw the possibility of freezing to death. It could happen.

For several weeks after that fall she felt out of kilter, and the computerized balance board she stood on to do her exercises kept telling her to stand up straight, that she was very unbalanced. It was months before she felt like herself again.

After falling, she threw away her old garden clogs with the soles worn smooth, and now always made sure her shoes had good traction. But she thought about that fall when the ground was icy, or even in spring or autumn sometimes, when the path to the coop was slick with rain and mud.

Now there was no ice, but the bitter wind made her shudder, and she held one scoop under her arm, trying not to spill pellets on the ground, so she could carry the jug of water, too. She hadn't been able to let the chickens out for more than a few hours for—oh, weeks. They could do okay in normal winter weather, but when it fell below 20 degrees, they would just sit in the wind all day with their heads down, trying to keep warm in their feathers until chicken dark, and then go back into the coop. "Chicken dark," was what Ruth and David called the hour before the sun set, when the shadows got long and signaled the flock that it was time to roost. They'd make their way back to the coop, and then Ruth would close the coop door against the night prowlers: possums, coyotes, raccoons. But now, below zero, their wattles and combs could freeze just like that in this weather, and their toes could get frostbitten, too, so Ruth would just leave them in the coop. If it was sunny and got up near thirty in the afternoons, she would let them out for a few hours just to get some air, but that hadn't happened in weeks. The worst part was that she couldn't even clean out the coop. The poop was just frozen in a big mound. She was waiting for a spring thaw, but now it was already March.

In the dark times of the year, around the solstice especially, Ruth would hear the whisper of the idea that maybe they should move to town. The kids wanted them to. Said they would worry less. Maybe winter was just too hard. But she would flick that idea away angrily. She wanted to die on this farm, just as her grandmother had. Not slowly freezing on the icy ground, but in her bed after a long and satisfying life. Surrounded by family, her sons and granddaughters holding her hand and saying goodbye. Saying, "I love you." Ruth teared up just thinking about it.

Or maybe in a tornado. The big wind lifting her up, up into the sky. That would be okay, too, as long as it wasn't in winter.

She walked quickly, and the wind hit her full in the face and slithered down the front of her robe. She should have put on at least a hat, or that warm scarf she knitted for herself, but it was too late now. She was almost to the chicken coop. It was a chicken tractor—a small movable coop with a big lid on top that opened like a chest freezer. Ruth set down the water and one of the scoops and hefted it open. She poured one scoop of pellets into the hopper and the chickens rushed to shove each other aside. She took the other scoop to the north end of the coop where she had put a stainless steel bowl in one of the nesting boxes. She worried that the smaller hens wouldn't get a chance at the big hopper with everybody shoving everybody aside. When she lifted the lid of the nest box, Ruth saw her little red hen, the one she called Rhodie. She was sitting at an odd, sideways angle. Ruth set down the scoop and lifted her up a little, trying to get her to stand, but she toppled over. Ruth picked her up and ran to the house.

In the winter Ruth kept a light on in the coop for heat, and an electric pad under the water to keep it from freezing, but day after day of arctic cold was probably just too

much. She got some newspapers and set up a pad on the kitchen floor and settled the little hen down on it. She got her sitting upright, then went to make some chicken tonic.

Over the years, Ruth had had good luck with nursing half dead hens back to life with a chicken tonic of her own invention. She took ideas from various recipes on the chicken discussion boards and added some common sense. Her recipe was a mash of oatmeal, yogurt, water, a splash of vinegar and a tablespoon of blackstrap molasses and some minced garlic. If you caught a chicken in time and kept it warm and spooned this mash into it until it was strong enough to eat, you had a good chance of saving it. Ruth wasn't sure that she had caught Miss Rhodie in time.

When David came into the kitchen to pour himself some coffee, Ruth was on a chair in the pantry, reaching for the molasses on the high shelf.

"There's a chicken in the kitchen," he said.

"I think she's going to die."

"She looks all right to me."

"Well, she's not. She can't stand up." Why did David always have to pretend everything was okay when clearly it was not? Ruth climbed down from the chair and opened the molasses and held it upside down over the bowl of mash. She only needed a little bit.

"Oh, you worry too much. She's fine."

"She's not." Ruth began hitting the bottom of the bottle rhythmically.

"Ruth, stop. It's not ketchup. You have to be patient. What are you making?"

"I'm trying to save my chicken."

David poured himself coffee and went out of the room.

"Thanks for your help and loving support," she called after him. She knew she was being bitchy, but in that moment she didn't care.

Ruth stirred her concoction into a yellow bowl and set it down in front of the chicken. Miss Rhodie's head had fallen forward against her breast. Ruth picked her up and dipped her beak into the bowl. Miss Rhodie kept her eyes closed but tilted her head back and opened and closed her beak to swallow. Ruth repeated the process a few times, and then left her alone. Warmth and a little food in her was about all Ruth could do for her. She went into her office to work.

Ruth had retired from teaching at the university at 65, but her retirement was modest since she was just an adjunct, not a real professor. She had picked up some online courses at the community college and kept writing her column for the local paper. The column in the paper brought in surprisingly little money, but gave her a weekly deadline and a readership. She would occasionally visit women's groups or nursing homes to read. But really what the column did for her was force her to keep up her writing practice, and she always tried to write every day. She wrote her column, of course, but also scholarly articles and reviews. She was working on some stories just for the boys. Family history and memories from her childhood. She had the sense that whole worlds were slipping away with time, and she wanted her boys to know where they came from.

David still kept his counseling office but worked only two days a week. This semi-retirement gave them a little more time together, a little more time to work on projects in the house and yard, a little money to travel to see Sophie and Rachel, Duncan's girls, and to visit the other two boys as well. Ruth should be enjoying life now,

and mostly she was. It was just this endless, frigid stretch of days that made her feel hopeless, that the whole world was going to go down in ice.

Ruth's "office" was really the guest room, previously Evan's bedroom. It still had the paper mural of The Green Lantern covering one wall. Duncan had painted it for his high school Homecoming dance so many years ago. Duncan had an artistic bent, like his father. After Evan left home, Ruth moved an old table in to serve as her desk. She'd put on music and spend a few hours each morning writing. But today she couldn't get going. She checked her email and fiddled with her phone. She kept getting up to look out the window, but felt worse every time she did.

David spent his mornings upstairs at his own desk. Sometimes he wrote poetry and sometimes case notes; occasionally he painted, but mostly poured over and over their finances. He had all kinds of financial data in the computer program he kept. Ruth sometimes wondered how she would figure that all out if anything happened to him. It wasn't that she couldn't keep her own books. She was always very good at that, but she hadn't really paid attention to all the passwords and various balances of savings and bills, even when David tried to show her.

But she worried about him, too, if anything would happen to her first. She was the one who kept in touch with the boys, having long conversations with them before asking if they'd like to talk to Papa. They always did, but both sides depended on Ruth to make the connection. The boys always called her, or she called the boys. She made a mental note to tell each of them to call their Papa once a month at least if anything happened to her.

Ruth shook her head. Why did she keep thinking about death? She found she was standing at the window again, looking out at the bleak back yard. The barn that was full of junk still stood, but on the west end a good piece of the roof had been torn off in the wind several years ago. The bean field stretched back, in grey and barren stripes to the fencerow. She picked up her empty coffee cup and went back to the kitchen.

Now Miss Rhodie was standing up. That was better. She had taken a few steps off the newspaper, and Ruth set her back in front of the bowl of chicken tonic. She turned to the sink to wash her hands and fill the kettle with water for tea. She had had enough coffee this morning. But when she turned back, Miss Rhodie had fallen over on her side, and was twitching and gasping for breath. Ruth rushed to pick her up and the little hen stretched her neck out and opened her eyes wide. Ruth had lost enough chickens to see that Miss Rhodie was dying, and she felt her own throat close up, choking back tears for the little hen, but also for the general lack of warmth and sun and green. She carried Miss Rhodie up the stairs to where David was working. She was crying, but she was angry, too. Angry at herself for not setting up a pen in the basement a week ago when she and David had joked about it. Angry at the bitter cold and the frozen mounds of poop in the coop.

David stopped typing and turned from the computer.

"Did your chicken die?"

Ruth nodded, and David screwed up his mouth and gave a shrug.

"Yeah, that dirty coop can't be good for the chickens. You can't bury it; the ground's frozen. You'll have to toss it in the compost bin."

He turned back to his writing and all Ruth's anger gathered in her chest and went straight for David. How could he be so icy? She felt that everything was horrible and dangerous: the bitter cold, the filth in the coop, her growing age, her sons so far away, her burning anger at David.

"I can't believe you."

David's head snapped up. "What's your problem?" He was scowling.

But Ruth was already stomping down the stairs.

She was still in her robe, and she ran to the kitchen and lay Miss Rhodie on the newspapers while she got dressed. She put on jeans and a sweater over long underwear. She put on her down parka and a hat and wrapped her face in a scarf. Already she was sweating as she pulled on gloves and picked up Miss Rhodie. Outside she walked back across the frozen field, bean stubble crunched and snapped under her boots. The heat her body had gathered getting bundled up in the house felt good for about a minute, but then dissipated and the wind bit at her cheeks where they were exposed, and her breath froze in her scarf. She carried the chicken all the way across the field to the back end of the Benson Woods. She crossed the meadow and found a flat rock at the edge of the tree line and lay the little hen on the rock. Now snot and tears were freezing on her face and she put her mittens on her cheeks, but that didn't help.

"Fly away, little hen," she said, and turned toward the house. She didn't look back as she crossed the field to go home. She thought about turkey vultures who would tear through the red feathers to get their meal, and then soar up, high in the sky. On the way back her hands and cheeks were so cold that she was really worried about frostbite. It was foolish to come out here without even telling David, without even bringing her phone.

What if she tripped? She could break her hip out here. She jogged slowly, and then when she got out of breath walked quickly over the dead rows of beans, jogging again when she could. At the house she tore off her mittens and ran immediately to the kitchen sink and turned on the cold water. It felt hot to her hands. Her fingers were white. She stood at the sink with her hands in the running water until they felt like her own fingers again.

It was late afternoon when Ruth remembered that she hadn't finished with the chickens when she was out that morning. After she found Miss Rhodie she had run in, leaving the coop open. What if the chickens hopped out? She went out and found the jug on the roof of the coop where she had left it, frozen through and through. The chickens were luckily huddled together, but she couldn’t see if they were really all there. She hoped so. The little side door that gave her access to the water bowl was frozen shut and she had to go back in for a screwdriver to pry it open. She found the chickens' water bowl empty, and then had to go back in for water in a bucket, since her jug was frozen and she didn't have another. The water from the sink was cold, but it still steamed from the bucket and when it sloshed over the edge and got her leg wet, the wind immediately froze it and then the stiff denim rubbed her shin as she walked. She poured the water and then lifted the nest box and found one egg. It had frozen and was cracked lengthwise, the crystalized white glistened from inside the crack. She picked it up. It looked like it was lit from within, even in the grey afternoon. She put it in her pocket and ran with her empty bucket back to the house.

The rest of the day David and Ruth avoided each other. They didn't fight like they used to when they were young, with lots of yelling and crying. Now when they were angry they just each burrowed into themselves. The old farmhouse was big enough that

they could keep out of each other's way with little trouble. That night they didn't even eat dinner together. Ruth poked around in the fridge for leftovers, and she didn't know whether David ate at all. About nine o'clock Ruth got ready for bed, but she found David had beat her to it, already asleep, or pretending to be, staunchly on his side. Ruth slipped in on her side and slept with her back to him.

Ruth got up once in the night for a glass of water and stood at the kitchen window for a long moment. The waning moon was rising over the Benson Woods and tangled up in the naked tree branches. It was bright orange. She first saw the light as an orange blur, and then went into the bathroom for her glasses. From the bathroom window she watched it for a long while. She could really see it rise. It was moving up through the trees, but it also seemed to be rocking, or maybe she was swaying in her sleepiness. She put her hand on the sink to steady herself, and still the moon was pulsing like a beating heart as it pushed up through the branches. Then it broke free and now it was sailing cleanly. The rocking was gone.

In the morning Ruth woke up to a blue glow in the bedroom, and David's side of the bed was empty and cold. She wondered if he was still mad at her. Maybe she deserved that silent treatment. She lay there for a moment, and then fumbled for her phone to check the time and the weather, but her phone was not on the bedside table.

She stood up and looked out the window. It was snowing gently, the whole world blanketed in white.

Ruth pulled her robe off the hook and went into the kitchen. David was gazing out the window. He turned to her, smiled, and reached for her hand. He led her down the stairs to the kitchen door and opened it. The snow had made a little shelf right up to the

doorjamb, about 8 inches tall. The fresh blanket spread over the yard. The cat came and nosed the shelf of snow. Sasha started toward the door, but David sent her back so she wouldn't spoil the perfect shelf. It seemed warmer, now, too. They stood in the open door for a moment listening to the hush. There was no wind, and the snow was a fine powder, falling straight down. Every structure, fence posts, bird feeders, the big stone at the corner of the driveway, had a conical cap of snow.

David said, "If this starts blowing, we'll have drifts up to your neck."

Ruth nodded.

They couldn't see where the walk was, or the driveway. All was a field of white. They went back up the stairs and looked out each of the windows. In the back, the four hackberry trees that grew in a straight line had their trunks collared in snow. The sedum that ran alongside Ruth's garden path was up to its waist. And now each individual flower head had a pointed cap, so they looked like two groups of gnomes on either side of a street, waiting for a parade to pass. In front, the birds hopped around beneath the feeders, a redbird, some grackles and sparrows. The snow stretched out, trackless all the way to the little copse of trees between the house and the road.

Ruth decided it was a baking day, but first she'd build a fire so when the bread and scones were in the oven, she could make soup on the wood stove. David went out and cut a path with his shovel to the garage, so he could get his little John Deere tractor out. Ruth saw him from the window, flinging the snow like powdered sugar over his shoulder. Each stroke threw a miniature snowstorm behind him. Ruth made coffee, fed the dog and cat, carried two scoops of pellets out to the coop. It was warm enough to let the chickens out, and they stood at the open door, looking fearfully out for a moment

before first one, then three, then all but Marco *Pollo*, her little Polish Silkie rooster and a few hens, ventured out into the white world.

When Ruth was in the kitchen measuring flour for bread, David came back in with a ruddy face and stomping his big boots, spraying snow on the landing. Ruth handed him a cup of coffee.

She said, "We should get some cross country skies. Wouldn't it be lovely to ski across the back forty to the timber?"

"Oh, we could only use skis about once every three years. What we really need is a horse." He took Ruth by the hand and led her to the window and pointed. "Wouldn't you like to saddle up your horse and ride out back there?"

She followed his finger, which traced the periphery of Ruth's family's fields.

He led her to another window to look out west. "And ride all the way over there and then, across the road—your Cousin Paul won't mind, if you ask him—to that hedgerow over there and then back over the road through the woods."

Ruth began to think about all the work that needed to be done before this could happen, but he had thought of it, too. "We have to build a strong fence, and fix a stable in the barn—"

"And fix the barn before it falls down."

"And fix the barn before it falls down. And we'll get you a little buggy and you can go to town and visit."

"And do my shopping." Ruth stood for a moment and imagined hitching her horse to a lamppost on the square while she went inside the drug store. She was thinking about

what she would do if the horse pooped while she was shopping. She guessed she'd bring a little shovel and a bucket. And then she thought of something else, too.

"Hey, who's going to feed this horse twice a day?"

"Oh, you'll do that. You love that stuff." He went back out to start up his John Deere. Ruth smiled and watched him go.

The John Deere made slow progress; David could only go forward a few feet before the snow jammed and he had to back up and try again. But that was okay, because here came the cavalry. Jim and Sean, the farmers down the road arrived with their giant tractor to save the day, as they always did. For the millionth time, Ruth wondered what they'd do on the prairie without such friends.

THE END OF THE BOOK OF TRUTH

WHERE YOU GO I WILL GO

2047

RUTH STEADIED HERSELF AT THE BOTTOM OF THE KITCHEN STAIRS with her hand on the doorknob and waited for her thoughts to clear. All morning she had been having waves of—what? Dizziness, but not exactly a physical dizziness. Confusion, but not exactly a mental confusion. Ruth waited for it to pass while she looked to the west, over the fields, to the back end of the Benson Timber, and her heart pulsed with a surge of sweetness. For an instant her whole life seemed laid out before her, as if she could see straight through the trees to the hippopotamus stone. When she exhaled, everything went back to normal. This had been happening to her lately, and she didn't understand it, so she took another deep breath of the morning air and went outside to water the flowers.

Nanny's peonies that were such a lush maroon only last week were gone, now just some dried crepe crumpled around browning stems. Ruth's grandmother was long dead, but tending the same flowers she had planted made Ruth feel close to her. A few of the lighter pink peonies that bloom a little later were still fresh, but many of those were now soft petals sprinkled on the ground beneath the bushes. The shasta daisies were about the only flowers open, though you could see that the day lilies were coming and the purple coneflowers had sent up their spiky, star shaped buds. They'd blossom next week. The hose was heavy to drag around the yard, but the weather had been like a miracle this year, coming off of the last six years of drought that were the worst Ruth had seen in the sixty

years she'd lived on this farm. It was worse, even, than those three years when Evan was in high school, where each summer was the hottest on record, when the overgrown Christmas tree plot her father and his sisters had planted as children turned brown and died, every last tree.

After the Piney Woods was gone, Ruth had started replacing more and more of her yard with native prairie plants, and planting vegetables in containers that she set on her garden path. These seemed to be easier to keep alive during frequent dry spells. Over the years she had slowly transformed the lawn into beds of flowers that expanded and grew closer until the yard was almost all a network of pathways through spots of color that changed as the progression of blooms cycled, not much left to mow, though a lot to weed. Jim and Sean had finally retired from tilling the family farm about ten years ago, and now Jim's daughter, Susan did the plowing and the planting. The fields were still mostly corn and beans, but now had pollinator strips and cover crops, and some of the underground drainage tiles had given way to a running stream, as it was when Ruth's father was a boy. Ruth had talked Susan into planting 10 acres of hemp when that first farm bill came out offering subsidies for it, and Ruth's friends teased her about growing weed, though the young folks who came of age after the marijuana prohibition ended never seemed to get the joke, looking askance at the old ladies giggling like they were stoned. Susan would plant a rotation of winter wheat after the main harvest. The farm was still in the country, though the little town of Chestnut Grove had become a suburb of Sangamon, and suburban developments surrounded Ruth's farm on three sides.

Ruth's back yard was her haven amidst all that sprawling growth, especially in the cool of the morning and shade of the evening. In twilight, the bats would emerge from

crevices in trees and corners of the barn. Ruth would sit with David and watch them in their little sky clearing, flying in the space surrounded by the crowns of maple and hackberry. The bats would dodge and swirl, going after insects that were invisible from the vantage point of the Adirondack chairs. Ruth would tip her head back and imagine swimming through the air like it was a bright lagoon, the leaves of trees like seaweed growing around the edges.

But that day it was suddenly ninety-eight degrees at half past ten in the morning. The last shower was over a week ago, and so she'd better water. Here was a stand of milkweed, just sending up pompons of green buds, here were some black-eyed Susans all set to bloom. Ruth dragged the hose over to the little pond, which was full of the fluff of the cottonwood trees, shedding now. Fluff floated on the wind from the east like a gentle flurry of snow. She would have to skim all that off of the surface of the water, but she had also noticed the water level going down in the pond, so she would fill it some. She dropped the hose into the pond and went back to pull some thistles she had seen on her path. She let a few thistles each year grow up and bush out until they were taller than Ruth herself because the butterflies liked them, and Ruth loved the magnificent purple blossoms. She would cut them, trying to avoid the spines that poked right through her gloves, and stand them upright in one of Nanny's flower frogs in a glass bowl. But thistles could get out of hand, too, and Susan wouldn't thank her for letting them take over and escape to the fields.

Ruth felt queasy in the heat of the morning. She walked to the barn to get her digging tools and her bushel basket, and as she came back out, the queasiness turned into full blown dizziness, and she thought she'd better sit down. But where was a chair? She

looked around and recognized her patch of daisies. There was the windmill. She dropped her bushel basket and walked up to the base and put her hand on the rusted iron leg to steady herself. Here was the ladder up to the snaggle-toothed blades of the windmill. She had once climbed that ladder as a child and gotten yelled at. She watched the wheel turning, turning against the blue sky. For a moment she was disoriented, and thought she was climbing—actually had a vision from the top, looking down at her tiny house below. But, no. Here she was with her feet solidly on the earth. She looked down and saw them, her two shoes in the grass, and they looked like cloddish things. Were they really her feet?

A moment floated by in crystalline detail. Young Ruth and David were driving alone on the highway when they passed a car. It was like a diorama, the characters encased in the moving scene, oblivious to any voyeurs. A dark haired mother and her small dark haired daughter sang together in the front seat. The windows were down, and the wind bounced their curls around, like seaweed in a rough surf. The mother's head tilted back, her mouth open in song, like a warbler opening her throat in praise of the morning. The child stood on the seat beside her mother, her plump arm raised, her dimpled hand bouncing in time to the song in naked exuberance. In a moment Ruth and David's car had slid past; the mother and daughter receding into the background, and Ruth turned to smile at David. He had seen them, too; it was clear in his face. His guard was completely gone, and he was smiling. Only then did Ruth take in the woman’s stunning beauty, but for once, she did not feel that clenching in her gut that always came when a gorgeous woman swept into David's sight. The song and the singers had joined Ruth and David in a moment of delight. Ruth reached for David's hand. But now Ruth

was looking in at her young self and David from outside the car window. How innocent and lovely they looked! She flew along beside them for another moment, and then the car receded, just as the singer's car had done. And Ruth was back in her own yard, holding on to the rusty leg of the windmill.

The dizziness hit her again, with more force, and she let go of the iron and looked around for a thing for sitting. *What was it? A sitting thing. Fucking Shit. Why can't she think of the name? What is the thing?* She turned away from the windmill and felt the good earth rise up to embrace her.

Ruth felt that it was taking a long time to fall. She seemed to be drifting to the ground. Cottonwood fluff drifted past her face, and thoughts drifted through her mind following those bits of down. Ruth needed to say something to her baby sister, but she couldn't think what it was. Someone was sorry. Was it Ruth or Penny? Another cottonwood seed drifted past, and she thought, "Della." Her great granddaughter's birthday was next week, and she and David had planned a trip to Chicago for the party. Finally she followed another thought, "Poor guys." She was thinking of David, and of their sons, Ya and Duncan and Evan. She saw their faces but the words were now lost to her. She could almost read their names in the cottonwood fuzz that floated past her face, and she tried to follow it, but she couldn't catch the writing before it faded, and then the names were gone, along with the words for "chair" and "pocket" and "bird" and "egg" and "sonnet" and "germination" and "picnic," and so many other things.

And then there were no more thoughts, but only sounds. The peeping of a killdeer at the edge of the field; the shush of traffic from the highway; the mourning dove still

crying for his mate, who had been eaten by a hawk only yesterday; the crow of her favorite rooster.

Above her, the four hackberry trees that grew in a diagonal line shaded her, and high in the canopy, the goldfinches trilled their chirruping call. A cardinal sang out, "birdy-birdy-birdy-birdy-birdy." The wind blew through the branches. Above the tree a great blue heron flew in a straight line toward the river in long, swooping strokes. A hawk circled. Cumulonimbus clouds shoved over the prairie, carrying precious water eastward. Above them, planes flew, carrying people to their loved ones, and above those, satellites moved silently across the heavens, sending messages down to earth. Beyond all this, Ruth was engulfed in a dazzling darkness.

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David was in the kitchen, pouring another cup of coffee, and he heard the microwave beep. Oh, yes. He had fixed his eggs hours ago. He looked at the clock. The microwave would continue to beep once a minute until you opened the door and took out whatever you had been cooking. Sometimes he'd go into the kitchen for lunch and find his breakfast still there. He remembered that he was hungry and pulled out his bowl of eggs and vegetables, then carried them up to his studio to eat while he drew some more. He was working on a series of drawings of the dog's face. Trixie was a yellow lab with sorrowful eyes, and David was trying to capture her ears and nose in clean, simple lines.

It was after noon when he came down and called for Ruth. He looked upstairs and downstairs and then went outside. There, by the windmill, she lay. Trixie lay beside her, her nose pointed right at Ruth's face. David felt his heart surge, and he ran toward Ruth,

wanting her to look up at him and smile, “I'm just looking at this ladybug,” she might say, and then follow him into the house for lunch.

But Ruth didn't say anything.

***

Duncan was the closest, just up in Chicago where he had retired to be near his grandkids, and he was the first one home, arriving just after David had finished talking with the hospital chaplain. Evan and Ya would each fly in the next day, and Ariella and the girls would follow. Now David was wandering around a kitchen that was filling up with food, though eating was the last thing he wanted to do. Molly had brought over a big bag of slider rolls from the bakery and some cold cuts. Susan had baked a rhubarb pie. Duncan helped Ruth’s sister, Hannah, run interference between the people calling and dropping by, telling David how sorry they were for his loss. Tomorrow Duncan and Hannah would go with David and make the funeral arrangements.

David had always assumed he would go first. He was the one with the high cholesterol, high blood pressure. He was the one who always had to have stuff clipped off and biopsied every time he had a damned colonoscopy. This couldn’t be right.

David looked out the window. Duncan was in the driveway, pacing as he talked on his phone. His head was down, and he stopped to kick the gravel, then turned back and paced the other direction. Hannah was kneeling in front of the open fridge, moving things around to make room for the cold cuts. The slider rolls could stay on the counter. She was crying softly. David went and put his hand on her quaking shoulder, and she stood up.

“David, can I fix you a plate?” She sniffed back tears, and wiped her eye with the back of her wrist. Ruth would have sobbed exuberantly until she was spent, her face a

patchwork of red blotches for hours afterwards. Hannah just sniffled, with a few tears. She was the more composed of the sisters, and for just a moment, David was furious at Hannah for holding herself together. But that quickly passed, and he went back to being grateful for her presence.

"No. I don't feel like eating." David went outside.

Dusk was falling, and Duncan had finished his phone conversation. "I'll go meet Ya's plane tomorrow at two," he said. "Evan's doesn't come in until about six, so one of us will go back and get him."

David nodded and walked numbly to the Adirondack chairs in the back yard. Duncan followed him, and they sat. David looked up. The sky still held some light over the darkening earth. There was a big space of sky between the old maple and the four hackberry trees. Bats were swooping in figure eights in the area between the treetops. Ruth called it "the sky meadow."

"Ruth loves to watch the bats," said David.

"I know, Dad."

The two men were silent for a long while. Lightning bugs began to twinkle over the tops of Ruth's flowerbeds, the lights rising slowly in the air, like bubbles.

Finally, Duncan shifted in his chair. "I think Hannah's gone home. Let's get you to bed, Dad."

"No, I want to stay out here a while longer. But you should go. You had a long drive."

Duncan nodded, then got up and stood behind David's chair for a moment. He put his hands on his father's shoulders and gave him a squeeze. "Night, Dad," he said. "Don't stay out too late."

David nodded. "'Night, son." He sat for a long while, listening to the evening sounds, the warbling croak of the frogs, the sawing of crickets, the rasping rattle of katydids. He was thinking of Ruth now. Again. He wasn't sure he'd ever stopped. But he was thinking of the young Ruth, the year they'd spent in Barcelona. She was so slender then, so full of youth and beauty. She had somehow lost her toughness over there in Spain, and it was a long time before she got her confidence back. But there was once in that year when it returned for an afternoon, and that's what he was thinking of now.

The three of them, Ruth, little Ya, and David, were walking in a narrow street in Palma. They had taken the ferry overnight to Majorca and were wandering the neighborhood like they always did. It was Christmastime, so they would have been in Spain for five months, but Ruth's Spanish was minimal. She had tried to get David to practice with her and Ya, but at home he would relax into English as soon as he stepped in the door. He knew she resented that. But here they were, walking in a lovely old street, sort of looking into the welcoming courtyards as they passed. Many had arched wooden doors, often with large pots on either side of a small stoop, going into the inner house. Maybe their curious glances through the doorways were taken as rude; maybe it was purely coincidence, but suddenly someone from a balcony a few floors above threw out a basin of wash water, so that it splatted with a loud ripping sound on the stones directly in their path. The water splashed up on them and without missing a beat, Ruth shouted up at the window above, "*Cuidado, eh*?"

David had just stared at her, as she pulled Ya along the street, indignant as a proper Spaniard.

"Where did you learn that?" he'd asked.

"Learn what?"

"To yell in Spanish like that." David didn't even know Ruth knew that word. In fact, he wasn't sure if she'd used it properly or not, but her accent sounded perfect to him.

Ruth shrugged and kept on walking. "They did that on purpose."

David remembered the love and admiration he felt for Ruth in that moment, and that same love wrapped itself around his heart now. In the Illinois darkness, he thought he heard the sound of running water, like a stream, and he put his head in his hands and sobbed.

***

In the morning, Duncan woke before David and fixed the coffee. Trixi was dancing for her breakfast, trying to coax him into the basement, and Duncan followed her downstairs. He didn't want to wake his father. He found the dog food in a metal garbage can at the base of the steps. He found chicken feed, too, and brought a big scoop out to the coop. He let the chickens out to run around in the yard, and that's when he saw the little pond overflowing with water. The hose had run all night where Ruth had dropped it, and the water had risen up and flooded not just the pond, but the pumpkin patch and Ruth's little kitchen garden of tomatoes and cucumbers. The water had even spread out past the peach trees and into the beans. Some killdeer ran along the edge of the water, making their beeping noises, and inexplicably, seagulls flew around above the flood.

Duncan ran to the hydrant to turn the water off and for the first time understood that his mother was gone.

END

ENCOUNTER
PART II: REUNION
1980

The fog makes a cave or an upside-down bowl around the car, and we can only see about thirty feet ahead of us. The metal corncrib gradually forms itself out of the mist.

"Here's the corner," I say, and Pete stops the car. I can see only the first couple of rows of stones in the cemetery across the road.

Pete turns toward me, pushes his blondish hair out of his eyes. It's long and straight, but kind of fly-away.

"Are you sure you don't want me to drive you up to the house?" he asks.

I nod, resting my hand on the shelf of my belly. I know he is relieved. My family wouldn't be any happier than his was. I don't even want him there.

"Cool beans," he says, and looks back straight up the road.

There is nothing else to say, so I put on my hat, open the car door, and heave myself up and out.

It's early November. I have another month. It's cold, and I'm glad I'm wearing my long, black coat. It feels weighty on my shoulders. I hear the car pull into the little gravel drive at the corncrib to turn around, but I don't look back. The asphalt has patches of ice, so I walk next to the road. Long grass pushes up through the snow, and it crunches under my feet. I am glad to be moving after the drive from campus. The bowl of clarity follows along with me through the fog, but has not yet revealed the house. When I hated junior

high so much, on foggy days I used to try to believe that some magic had transported me to Brigadoon, or that the school had disappeared, but it was always there.

The walk seemed longer in the fog, and I began to wonder if I had missed the farm lane. Maybe it would be better if I did miss it. It was a narrow drive that led to the house with only the slightest curve, open fields on either side. The mist seemed to be thickening, but then I made out the mailbox, leaning drunkenly. It had big, reflective letters on it, crookedly declaring itself Box 25. I turned up the lane.

Grandma was the one I was worried about. Grandpa would yell, but my stoic grandmother would just sit stony faced and look at me. They already knew, but I hadn't seen them in person since going away to college last August. I don't care what anybody thinks. I'm not going to drop out.

I wasn't looking forward to this, but the cold and determination kept my pace brisk. I heard a muffled sound up ahead, and out of the fog a black dog came running straight towards me. I stopped. I had never seen it before. It stopped, too, then broke into a wriggling trot, tail wagging in a circle like a windmill. It came right up to me, and I held out my hand. It sniffed me all over, and then actually stood up on its hind legs and put its front paws on my shoulder to lick my face. Have I been away so long that they got another dog? Duchess was a shepherd mix, and this looked like a Lab.

The dog had just a little grey in her muzzle, as if she had touched her chin whiskers to a bucket of white paint. She had the heavy body of doggy middle age. I saw she was a girl. She finished her inspection and then turned back to walk with me up to the house.

At the door I paused. I had always just walked into my grandmother's house—that's how we do—but would my long absence or my news change things? I decided it wouldn't if I didn't let it, and I turned the knob. The dog followed me inside.

I stepped up the three stairs into the kitchen. It was all—rearranged. They did all this in a year? The same cupboards but in different places, a new stove, a new window? I had rehearsed in my head calling out, "Grandma," but this change stunned me into silence, and I walked through the kitchen. The dog went on ahead of me through the dining room and into the living room, and I heard a voice.

"Ursa? How did you get in? Did somebody come home early?"

Back comes the dog, and in comes a woman, with her head down, still looking at the dog.

My first thought was that Aunt Candy had lost a lot of weight.

"Hi?" I said, and she gave a little yelp and looked up.

It wasn't Aunt Candy.

"Oh. My. God," she said, quietly, and put her hand to her cheek." How did you get here?"

And somehow I knew.

I thought, "If this is a dream, I'm just going to go with it."

At first we only stared at each other. She must be, what, forties? She was fat for one thing. Not fat like Aunt Candy, but fatter than I ever wanted to be. She looked—ordinary. She wore all brown. Some kind of knit pants and a brown turtleneck. Her pants had been mended at the knee. Not a patch, just darned or something. I only noticed because she had used a darker brown. It was a chain stitch of some kind. She didn't wear

any earrings or anything to fix herself up. She looked like a little brown bird with her round, tortoiseshell glasses. Her hair didn't have much grey, but it had some, and it was cut short around her face.

My face.

She had my face. The same mole over her lip. Eyebrows thicker, though, and unruly.

"Well," she said, finally. "You're here."

And I nodded. I didn't know what to say. What do you say?

We just stood looking at each other for a long moment. Then she shook her head, like she was shaking herself out of a trance.

"How about a cup of tea?" she asked, all business, and we went back into the kitchen.

She put the kettle on and we made small talk while it boiled. It was really ridiculous: "How have you been?" "Oh, pretty good, mostly. You?" That sort of thing. I started laughing and couldn't stop. Then she was laughing, too, and it was okay for a minute, and then the kettle sang out and she pulled two blue cups from the cupboard, then the saucers. Nanny's Fiesta ware.

"Earl Grey all right?"

I nodded.

I wondered if I should ask her questions, but I didn't know what to ask. For instance, I didn't really want to know whether I was having a boy or a girl, but then she spoiled it. I guess it wasn't her fault that their pictures are on grandma's old credenza. She didn't know I would show up that day. I picked up one triple frame. It was shaped

like a tiny ladder with three snapshots, one above another. At the top is a toddler with wispy blond curls. He sits in a swing and looks at me. In the middle sits a redhead at the beach. He kneels in the sand, squinting into the sun. I can see the blue and white of the surf coming in behind him. His hair is thick. He looks about seven. The bottom picture is a blond boy in his teens sitting in a tree. I look at him the longest. It seems to me that he has her—our—eyebrows.

"Your boys?" I ask her. But she doesn't even have to answer, and already I feel a sense of loss. I know it's dumb, but I had just assumed I would have a girl. I wouldn't know what to do with a boy. I never liked to play with trucks. Come to think of it, I never liked to play with dolls, either. I think it was looking at those photos that made me cry.

"I'm sorry," I said. "This is all a bit too much."

I just felt—stupid. She was sitting there looking at me like—like she had it all handled, and that made me feel like an idiot. That's really why I started crying. And if she couldn't understand that, who would? And she didn't seem to, at first, but then I think maybe it was almost too much for her, too, because as we sat drinking our tea she took off her glasses and set them on the table and rubbed her eyes, like she had a headache, or was tired. I set my glasses on the table and put hers on. I looked around the room. She's pretty blind. Now she was looking at me. I looked down at my tea to take a sip, and I was suddenly seasick.

"Oh!" I said and snatched the glasses off my face.

She laughed. "It's the bifocals. You'll need them when you hit forty. Everybody does."

I was afraid to ask her too much about what her life is like, how she ended up at the farm. I never thought that would happen. She seemed happy out here. Happy to see me, too, after the initial shock, especially after I showed her the bootie I was knitting. We sat and knitted together until the dusk began to creep into the room.

She follows me down the kitchen steps and out the door. We linger a little over our goodbyes. The fog has gone and the moon is rising. She gives me a hug, leaning into my shoulder and patting me on the back. I am patting her back in the same way, and we both laugh a little. We don't want to part—at least I don't, but I know I have to go. Ursula follows me down the lane to the mailbox, and then sits on her haunches. I put my hand on my belly and look at the sky as I walk back up the road.

I'm thinking about everything she told me, and wondering what she kept to herself. She said I should treat everyone like gold. At least I think that's what she meant. First she said to treat the baby like gold, and I said, "Well, duh." But then she got really quiet and took my face in her hands. For a second I thought she was going to kiss me, but she looked right into my eyes while hers were filling up with tears. She said, "Err on the side of kindness."

"What do you mean?" I asked her. "Am I not kind?"

"Oh honey, you are kind—most of the time. And when you're not you're certainly justified. All I'm saying is that someday you will regret every chance you missed to be loving." She sighed and looked away. "You will never regret being kind, but those missed opportunities will prick your heart like thistles."

Clouds are gathering overhead, but near the horizon is one bright star. Just above it the full moon is rising, throwing shadows behind me. Coming up over the

cemetery, it's a smoky orange and bigger than I've ever seen it. Almost like a cartoon. I feel like I've never seen a moon this big or this clear. I feel like I can see the Sea of Tranquility from here. I think about something I learned in my World Mythologies class last spring. That in India they don't see the man in the moon. They see a rabbit instead. I stare at the moon as I walk down the lonely road. And now I see a long-legged bird in the shadows of the craters. It is flying towards home.

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