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# This Is My Idaho

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THIS IS MY IDAHO

by

Cynthia L. Struloeff

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College of the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Dr. Jonis Agee

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2006

## THIS IS MY IDAHO

Cynthia Leanne Struloeff, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2006

Advisor: Jonis Agee

*This Is My Idaho* is a collection of short stories set in or around the fictional town of Eagle City, Idaho, in southeast Idaho near the borders with Montana and Wyoming. There is a wildness in this part of the world, circled by high, unforgiving mountains, that resonates within the people there. The characters of this collection must hammer out their lives against this landscape. Some, like Mary in “What the Good Is,” and Ginny in “The Sugar Shell,” feel the mountains as a kind of barrier between them and the rest of the world and yearn to escape. Others, such as the curator for the Philo T. Farnsworth television museum in “Evidence,” go to the mountains looking for answers. And some, like Colleen in “Silvertip,” and Andy in “Andy’s story,” are forced to confront the harsh way Idaho shapes them into the people they will grow up to become.

The writers who influenced this collection, especially Elizabeth Bowen, Carol Bly, Flannery O’Connor, Eudora Welty, and Jane Smiley, were committed to giving us truth through a sense of place. As Welty says, “Location is the ground conductor of all the currents of emotion and belief and moral conviction that charge out from the story in its course,” and Idaho, in this sense, proves to be fertile ground. But this collection in

more than a book about people from Idaho. It is about the way we all, against the obstacles of nature and love, must come to define ourselves as something born out of and separate from the places we come from.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am especially grateful to my committee, Jonis Agee, Judy Slater, Susan Belasco, and Margaret Jacobs, for their wisdom and encouragement. I would like to thank my parents, for supporting my dream of words, and my friend and favorite reader, Wendy Johnston, for always reading my stories with delight. Finally, I would like to thank my husband, who inspires me, challenges me, and loves me through the revisions.

For John

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## THE SUGAR SHELL

My first job was working for a woman named Ellie Ford, the summer before my freshman year of high school. It had been one of the worst years of my life; it changed me, and I knew I could never go back to being what I was before, untouched by the ugly things in this world. I had been a child. I was not yet a woman, and I could not see the point of being in between. What I remember most from back then was wanting to hop a train and get on with my life somewhere far away from country life. I thought Maine sounded nice, a place I'd never been to but thought looked fine with all those lighthouses and boats and people eating lobsters.

Nobody ate lobsters in Eagle City, and nobody wanted to, because you can't get good shellfish in Idaho, and because the Bible says you don't eat things out of the water that don't have scales and fins. Of course, the Bible also says that you don't eat pigs, but folks ate bacon without a fuss. I might have been that way too, content with the reasons people had for things, pleased enough with the mountains to not want to see the ocean, eating off what we grew for ourselves. I'd grown up with the feeling that our family was paring down like layers of onion. There had been nine of us in the beginning—seven kids, two parents—and then, one by one, I started to lose my brothers and sisters to the outside, to husbands and wives and houses all their own, until there was just six of us still

home, waiting for my brother Jason to graduate and go, too. I knew I'd be next. But then my mother died, when I was just fourteen, and left me the oldest girl still at home. She died in March, of a cancer that came and took her so quick that it left us all feeling like we were stuck in the same bad dream. And then there was just us five.

Things were quiet for a while, just falling apart, falling down, nobody watching them. Dad had always been a tall drink of water, six four and wiry, but strong. Now that left him. He got too thin. His hair started to fall out. I'd sweep up little drifts of it from the bathroom floor, vacuum a fine layer off the back of his armchair. He kept on like he always had, like he hadn't noticed that Mama was gone. He went to work at the nuclear plant at six in the morning, came home at six at night, sat at the kitchen table for an hour whether there was food there or not, then pulled back into the living room reading the newspaper for the few hours before he went to bed. Every week he handed me off a hundred dollar bill to buy groceries, said that I was the woman of the house now. But he didn't look me in the eyes.

The four of us kids still at home got by however we could. Jason was a senior in high school and he went on with his routine, like Dad did, football and yearbook and dates with the homecoming queen. He worked nights at the supermarket unloading and packing, and was smart enough that he didn't need too much sleep or study. Levi, then twelve years old, and Robbie, only nine, found a family down the road who had lost their only son in a hunting accident the fall before, and they ate most of their meals over there, slipping home after dark to shower and sleep. It'd suck the breath out of me to come home to our house like that, the gardens dead and dying around it, the shingles blown loose, sticking up at all angles, the windows dark. The house looked like a cold place.

Our four horses stood close to the fence, their necks hanging over limp and loose, their noses almost touching the ground.

I spent a lot of time at Safeway grocery, the hundred dollars clutched in my hand, walking the aisles and thinking about dinners my mama used to make, the smells of roast beef and potatoes, asparagus she cut from the sides of canals that twisted like secret roads over the Idaho countryside, places only she knew about. She would steam the stalks to bright green and roll them in butter. The asparagus in the store never looked as good to me, dry and purple at the ends, but I bought it anyway. I followed other women around, watching the way they fingered things before they bought them, the way they held packaged meat in their hands and squeezed, the way they brought fruit to their faces and smelled it. I tried to be one of them, touching, weighing, smelling. I tried to tap into that womanly part that knows what to do, what I most wanted to get from Mama besides her brown eyes. It didn't come. I boiled the asparagus to a gray limpness. I laid heaps of blackened, unrecognizable meals on the table before my father, and he always picked at them with his brows drawn together, his eyes refusing to confirm that I was not my mother.

So I turned out to be a failure at being a woman, and after awhile I cut myself loose from the job. My father stopped paying me. But I still went to the Safeway. I stole a little, mostly sweet things. Chocolate was something I'd never had a lot of, even before she died. I'd unwrap that stolen candy and let it curl around in my mouth, thinking it might rot out my teeth since all four of us kids had missed our yearly dentist appointments. I ate so much candy I got cankers on my tongue. I had a mouth full of pain, and I thought it would only get worse with time to fester.

I got caught stealing in June, just after school was out for the summer. Seven Baby Ruth's, two Snickers, five Milky Ways, slipped in my pocket at the gas station. It amounted to about fifteen dollars I owed, total, and a ride in the back of the sheriff's truck.

"Ginny," said my father, after the sheriff dropped me off, "I'm not going to baby you."

"That's fine," I said, and I felt brave because I'd been planning these next words since I'd enjoyed the sweetness of that first stolen candybar. "But it'd be nice if you fed us once in a while."

My father folded his newspaper and laid it on the coffee table. He stood up, put his hands in his pockets, and looked at me. He had the look of a farmer in a hailstorm. He looked tired, like the horses, and then he turned and walked down the dark hall, toward the bedroom that he and Mama used to share, and said as he went, "You will pay for the candy you stole, Ginny, with your own money."

He knew I didn't have my own money. I took his newspaper into my room and read the want-ads, the sound of the newspaper crackling the only proof that, in our house, there was someone left alive. That's when I saw the ad for the part-time job at the Sugar Shell.

The Sugar Shell was a cake decorating shop on the edge of town. For years it was the only cake decorating shop in Eagle City, and even after some of the grocery stores started selling cakes, business there was good. Sugar Shell cakes were cheaper, tastier, and prettier than anything a supermarket could whip up, and that was a good combination

for the women of Eagle City, whose husbands were wheat and potato farmers and workers for the nuclear plant out in the Arco desert. The Sugar Shell was a small white brick building right next to the bowling alley, just across the railroad tracks where town mostly ended and country began. It wasn't much to look at, squarish and squat like a bent old woman, the brick more gray than white, with a row of large windows that lined the east side of the building, blocked by heavy, yellowing blinds. There was no way to keep those windows clean, though God knows I washed them often enough. The trains that came by kicked up the kind of dust that stuck, a mixture of cow manure and the dirt that dried and blew off spuds, and those trains came by every single day.

The front door led into a small entryway, where people would post up papers on the sides, layers of missing dog posters and jobs for hire, signs for washing machines for sale and sun-bleached calls for babysitters. Eagle City always has a wind going, and when the front door swung open those papers fluttered and crackled like startled birds. A little farther in hung a silver bell about the size of my fist, which rang out a nice, loud dong when the main door opened.

Inside the Sugar Shell, the light came in golden and hazy, the dust floating around like it was mixed with sugar, sweet with the taste of vanilla and lemon. I went in the main door and stood looking at the hooks on white particleboard where cake decorations, miniature ballerinas and plastic pigtailed girls to tiny football players and golfers, hung in neat rows. Against one wall there were shelves stacked with cake pans, dusty silver totems of different shapes, for bunt, angelfood, heart shaped, rabbit-eared, and Christmas tree cakes. Against the other wall was a line of clean glass counters, where various types and sizes of wedding cakes stood on display, all of them white and perfect.

“You look like you want something specific,” said Ellie from behind the counter when I came in. “I hope I have it.”

Ellie had always seemed like a giant to me. I knew, just from the way people talked, from the way my mother had talked, that Ellie Ford was one of the nicest women in town. She was also one of the biggest. She was probably around six feet tall and weighed near four hundred pounds. She wore huge, baggy tee-shirts and sweatpants that sagged in the legs. She couldn't get aprons that would fit her comfortably all the way around, so she bought white butcher's aprons, which were usually made bigger, and embroidered the words “The Sugar Shell” in blue and yellow on the front. She towered over the counter and cash register, framed by fancy wedding cakes.

“It's hot today. Enough to wilt a person,” she said.

“I want a job,” I said.

Ellie didn't seem surprised to hear such a thing; she looked like she had been expecting it for some time, like I was late, even, to have come in there and said it. She had gray eyes that had a pinkness to them, as if she smoked or cried a lot, but her eyes were watery and kind.

“How old are you?” she said, looking right into my face.

“Fourteen.”

Ellie clucked her tongue and shook her head.

“My brothers moved pipe at thirteen,” I said. “Nobody cared.”

She was quiet for a minute, standing with her dimpled arms crossed, leaning her enormous belly against the glass counter, and then she said, “I've got frosting to make. Come in the back and sit with me while I think it over.”

I slipped around the counter after her and through a swinging door into the kitchen, where there was a huge formica-topped counter in the center of the room, scattered with her tools of the trade: a shallow case containing over a hundred silver frosting tips, a bowl of white couplers, rolls of waxed paper and soft, clean parchment, scissors, a box of toothpicks, and a stapler. There was also a gallon of whole milk, a large glass canister of powdered sugar, bottles of orange and vanilla flavoring, and tiny plastic containers of food coloring. Ellie picked up a silver bowl and started to whip some milk, sugar, and vanilla together with quick, strong motions, her arms suddenly flexing as tight and muscular as a boxer's. There was a set of stools against the outside edges of the counter, and I sat on the one farthest from Ellie and watched her work that frosting over.

"You ever done this before?" she asked into the bowl.

"No."

"Your mother never taught you?"

"She was too busy."

Ellie gave a little snorty chuckle. "I suppose that's true, with a kid for every day of the week. She never was in here much. Made her own cakes. Last time I saw her was when she came in to buy the bride and groom for the oldest girl's wedding cake. What was that one's name?"

"Laura," I said. "I came with her that time."

"Did you?" Ellie started to spoon the frosting into the end of a large parchment funnel. "Which one are you?"

"Ginny," I said. "Virginia."

“I used to teach night classes,” Ellie said. “I taught all the housewives around here how to decorate. I taught your mother; it must have been almost twenty years ago, now. She was just married then.” She kept slapping the frosting into the funnel until it bulged and then set the bowl down and folded the ends of the funnel in tightly. I could not take my eyes off the movement of her hands, how practiced and precise it was, like folding origami. She snatched up the pair of scissors and snipped off the end of the funnel, then picked a silver tip from a box without hardly looking at it and twisted it onto the end of the frosting tube with a white plastic coupler. “I don’t have the time to teach anymore,” she said. “I have too many orders.”

Then she put the frosting tube into my hands and molded her plump fingers around mine. Her hand was cool and moist, softer than any hand I’d ever touched. “You have to put on just the right amount of pressure,” said Ellie, squeezing my hand hard so that a little bit of frosting emerged from the tip of the tube. “From the strength of your hand, not the fingers. Too hard and the frosting will all push out the top of the packet. You want to be able to form a nice, consistent line. Try here,” she said, letting go of my hand and ripping off a small sheet of waxed paper, which she laid in front of me on the counter.

I touched the tip to the waxed paper and squeezed. Nothing came out.

“This is harder than milking a cow,” I said. “I’ve milked a cow all my life.”

Ellie smiled, still watching the tip of the frosting tube, which produced nothing.

“We sold our cow,” I said.

“The frosting might be a little too thick. Squeeze hard,” Ellie said. “From the top.”

I squeezed until a muscle at the edge of my hand cramped and a fat line of frosting came out onto the paper, getting thinner as I dragged it along, then lumping as I relaxed my hand and pushed again. “This is probably not what you meant by a nice, consistent line.”

“It’s a line,” Ellie said. “You can work on consistent tomorrow.”

I laid the tube down on the counter.

“You mean it?”

“Two o’clock,” she said. “I’ll pay you four dollars an hour, five when you get to where you can frost a decent cake, six when you get to wedding cakes.”

I felt like I’d been poked with a cattle prod, really awake, for the first time in months. “I’ll be to six in no time.”

“We’ll see,” she said. “Now clean up that line of yours and make sure that you’re on time tomorrow. Wear a white button-up shirt and slacks. No jeans.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I swiped the frosting off the waxed paper with my finger and put it in my mouth. It was a sweet, fragile sort of taste, melting away quickly on my tongue. It was better than the candy bars.

Ellie worked me hard, after that. Every day from two until five, when the shop closed, she set me to doing simple things: cleaning the windows, arranging and dusting the glass counters, tagging new items that came in, taking cake orders from bright-eyed brides-to-be, who didn’t seem so much older than me. The work kept me busy, got me talking to people again, and got them talking to me about something other than my mother. Ellie put the store into my hands; while I was there she stayed almost

exclusively in the back. Once in a while, friends of hers would wander in for flimsy reasons and she'd recognize their voices and come booming out to wait on them herself. By that I knew that she was keeping a close watch on me from the kitchen.

I had a power of my own in the Sugar Shell. I could pretend, for all its flaws, that the little shop was mine. I played the radio as loud as I liked. I breathed that sugary air in deep and rolled up my sleeves and stocked, dusted, polished, and organized until the shop gleamed with my own kind of heavenly light. When the bell over the main door rang, I smiled at those women, and got them what they needed, and talked about how hot it was that summer, enough to wilt a person, I found myself saying again and again. The clock over the cash register spun away the hours. The trains rumbled by twice during the afternoon shift. The sound of the train whistle filled the shop, and that was the only time that the spell was broken, when I remembered that I wasn't Ellie Ford but a smaller, sadder person, and there was another place in the world where I'd rather be.

Things were different after the store closed at five. Ellie came out for a few minutes, surveyed my work. "Today you made good business," she'd say, and then she'd clap a hand down on my shoulder and lead me through the swinging door into the kitchen. "Now let's get you to making a good cake."

I was a natural with the details of the store. I was a flop with cakes. Ellie taught me ingredients first, the things you mix for the best tasting cakes. A pinch of salt, for instance, to keep the sugar from overwhelming the tastebuds. "A lot of cakes are just too sweet," Ellie'd say. "Put in some salt."

"How much?" I'd ask.

“Stick your fingers in and pinch some out,” she’d say, and then, after I did what she asked, she’d say, “That’s too much.”

Ellie didn’t care for recipes or exact measurements. She measured things with her eyes, with the feel and weight of an ingredient, with the precision of her hands. What I was missing in the grocery stores days had not come into me yet. So I tried and failed and tried and failed again, first at baking, then at the simple frosting of a cake, but mostly at decorating, at forming the consistent border of thin white frosting along a cake’s slippery edge. I couldn’t do it no matter how hard I tried. Ellie was patient. Her instructions were always given gently, usually with my name in front of them, like, “Ginny, you might want to check to see if that cake’s ready to come out of the oven,” or “Ginny, you didn’t screw down the coupler tight enough. If you squeeze the tube now, you’ll shoot frosting all over the counter.”

She didn’t like to play the radio when we worked back there; she said that this time, when the bell on the front door quit ringing, was her best thinking time. She didn’t talk much, either, and it was uncomfortable at first, the two of us just standing there, me trying to smooth icing on the cakes with a dull knife and some milk, Ellie with the tube of frosting in her hand, her eyes never leaving the latest cake. We could hear bowling balls next door knocking into the pins and the sound of men laughing.

After awhile, I started to make it my thinking time too. I thought about my mother. I tried to remember about how brown she had been, the strong shape of her shoulders smattered with freckles and dirt under her tank tops as she yanked weeds. I tried to remember the Fourth of July parades where our family rode horses down Main Street in cowboy hats and chaps, the way she waved like a beauty queen. I tried to

remember the way her face had looked before it'd swelled up, before she'd fallen down that day and never gotten up, but I was losing it. I was losing the image of her in health, left instead with the sight of her body across the bathroom tile, her skirt still bunched at her hips, her right leg bent back unnaturally between the toilet and the wastebasket. "Oh no," my brother Jason had whispered, leaning over her. "Oh no," he said, trying to blow the life back in. I dripped plenty of tears into bowls of frosting, and Ellie saw me, but she never said a word. At nine o'clock she'd say, "let's get this all cleaned up," and at nine thirty she would drive me to the end of my long gravel driveway and wait until I went inside and turned on the porch light before she drove away.

I brought my failures home. There were burned cakes and cakes taken out too soon, cakes with sunken middles, cakes that had resisted coming out of the pan, cakes cracked down the centers like the edges of earth after an earthquake, layer cakes that refused to sit right, leaning heavily to one side on the other. They were at all levels of bad. On each cake I slapped a layer of thick chocolate frosting, carried it carefully up the unlit walkway into my house, and left it on the kitchen counter. The next morning I'd find the empty plate on the counter, scattered with small, dark crumbs, as if during the night the cake had been carried off by an army of hungry mice.

Then there came a night, about an hour into our work, when someone thumped on the front door so hard it made the bell in the entryway ring. Ellie and I both went out to have a look. When I first saw Martha, standing outside hugging her arms to her chest like it was cold, she was wearing one of my mother's old sundresses, which my father had taken to Deseret Thrift Store after Mama wasn't there anymore to wear it. It was one

of her favorites, white with yellow daisies on it. It had glowed against my mother's bronzed skin.

Ellie unlocked the door and said, "Martha Wilkens, what can I do for you?"

"Who's that?" said Martha, looking at me with her head turned to the side. She looked familiar, more than just being in my mother's dress, and a little drunk or off kilter in some other way. She was as thin as Ellie was fat, just sticks and skin, and her mousy brown hair didn't seem to want to lie right on her head.

"This is Virginia Thorton," said Ellie. "She's helping me out with the cakes. You want to order a cake?" She held the door open and Martha sidled in under her arm, still looking at me like I might jump out and bite her.

"Tom's bowling," she said. "He bought a bowling ball, can you believe that? He's a bowler now, he says."

"Stranger things have happened," said Ellie.

"Not to me. I hate bowling. It's got to be the stupidest thing," said Martha.

She followed Ellie and me into the kitchen and plopped herself right down on my stool.

"You got a light?" she said.

Ellie fumbled in a drawer for a match. I could only stare as Martha lit her cigarette, inhaled deep, and then blew smoke out all over the cake I'd been frosting.

"It's too quiet in here," she said.

Things were never too quiet after that. Martha, she had a mouth and she used it. She smoked three cigarettes that night, asking Ellie for a match each time. She liked to strike the match hard against the matchbook and put it to the cigarette in her mouth while

it was still flaring. I pulled up a stool on the other side of the counter and managed to get my cake out of the reach of most of the smoke. While Ellie and I worked, Martha told us all about her life, how she had grown up in Boston, Massachusetts in a fancy house and how she'd come out west to go to school somewhere we'd never heard of. She'd ended up in Eagle City after she married her husband Tom, when his mother here took sick, and she'd lived with him in a trailer two roads down from the Sugar Shell ever since. As she talked, I finally recognized her as one of the bus drivers for my school district, the woman my older brothers, Johnny and Jason, had teased something fierce when they'd been in high school together. I'd heard one story, the story of April Fool's Day, maybe a hundred times.

"Mrs. Wilkens is a good driver," Johnny had said from the back of the bus, loud and clear so Martha would be sure to hear him.

"April Fools!" shouted Jason.

"Mrs. Wilkens sure is a pretty woman."

"April Fools!"

They went on and on like that, a couple of regular jerks. But I always laughed when they told it, at the way they'd mimic her facial expressions, her rage, her scowls, the way her hands clutched the steering wheel. She'd been their own personal wicked witch. But now that she was standing in front of me, talking in that scuffed up voice of hers, I couldn't figure her out. From what she told Ellie and me, Martha had once been a sophisticated lady, and how she went to being pretty close to a bag lady she never did tell us, for all that talking. She cussed enough to make the wallpaper peel off the walls, some words that would have had my father running for a bar of soap, some words that I'd never

heard before, but sometimes a different kind of word would come out of her, one that seemed too big for her to be wearing.

“How’s the cake business?” she asked Ellie.

“Steady,” Ellie said. “All these summer weddings and birthdays and such.”

“You can’t find places like this anymore,” Martha said. “It’s God’s honest truth. Do you know that Safeway is selling cakes now? Exorbitant prices, thirty dollars for a little birthday cake. They write the name on it while you wait.”

“Folks are in a hurry, sometimes,” was all Ellie said.

After Martha had been with us for a couple hours, there was another thump on the door outside, so hard it jarred the wall, and a muffled curse. Martha hopped off that stool like she’d been poked.

“That would be Tom,” she said, putting out her cigarette in a hurry. Then she was gone, a whirlwind in my mother’s flowered dress, before Ellie and I could even say goodbye.

“Too many cigarettes,” Ellie said, after the quiet had settled back in. “Too many cigarettes and too much crying will ruin a voice like Martha Wilkens’. She used to sing in the choir, when she first came. She sang ‘Amazing Grace’ so that everyone in the room would be a-bawling.”

“Her voice is like chopped onions,” I said. Ellie smiled.

“No cigarettes for you, Ginny,” she said.

“No, ma’am.”

“Let’s get this all cleaned up.”

“I hope to God that Martha Wilkens isn’t my bus driver this year,” I said as I stacked up cake pans on the shelves.

Ellie, washing out couplers in the sink, looked sad for a minute.

“Martha’s not doing that job anymore,” she said. “I don’t know what she’s doing.”

Martha visited us nearly every night for the rest of the month, staying a couple hours while her husband bowled. It didn’t take us long to figure out that Tom Wilkens took up bowling because he’d been permanently thrown out of the only bar in town. He didn’t bowl so much as drink, and didn’t come inside the Sugar Shell. He’d stand outside and bang on the door and yell. Most of the time Martha would hustle out there to meet him, but sometimes, if she was wearing fresh bruises from the night before, she’d pull a compact out of her purse and try to cover them up again with powder. Maybe seeing a bruise on her face reminded Tom of what he could do to her. Tom silenced Martha. As he howled away outside, she’d close the compact slowly and lift her chin and slip out the kitchen door and through the dark shop without another word.

She wore a lot of my mother’s old dresses, dresses Mama had mostly worn to church, but Martha wore them every day. They didn’t hang right on her thin little body, without my mother’s strength to fill them. Sometimes when I looked at Martha in those dresses I felt lucky to have known my mother, and to be reminded of how beautiful she was just by seeing how beautiful Martha was not.

Every night Martha sat on a stool and smoked, and talked non-stop. I felt sorry for her. But I didn’t like her. The Sugar Shell lost its magic when it was filled with her

gravelly voice. As beaten down and drug out as she was, Martha had a fire in her that burnt. She made me feel like what I was, a teenager who didn't know much about anything. I think she hated me a little, on account of my brothers. Martha loved to laugh at me. When Ellie tried to teach me to make roses out of frosting, Martha was right there, grinning as I cut out little pieces of waxed paper, poked a toothpick through, and tried to layer petals around it.

“That one looks just like a cabbage,” she said, laughing and coughing, waving her cigarette around in the air.

“Ginny, try not to layer the petals so tightly,” said Ellie.

“Ooh, that one's a pinecone,” shrieked Martha, flinging ashes everywhere.

“Ginny, try that one again,” said Ellie.

“Yes, try it again, Virginia,” said Martha. “Make us a whole tree full of pinecones.”

“You think you could do better?” I said, holding out the tube of frosting.

Martha shook her head. “I have no interest,” she said, “in making anything sweet.”

She wasn't interested in eating anything sweet, either. Ellie tried to get her to eat cake, but Martha refused. “Got to watch my figure,” she'd say. “Don't want Tom to have trouble getting his arms around me in the night.”

I wondered if it hurt Ellie's feelings when she said things like that. Ellie never gave a sign that Martha's chatter bothered her like it did me. She just kept to her cakes, nodding occasionally to what Martha said, the tube of frosting held tight in her hands.

And then one night, we remembered our fathers. Martha, through her second or third cigarette already, started it up.

“He was rich, my old man, but he was a mean one,” Martha said. “And my husband’s just the same, but poor.”

“Why’d you marry him, then?” I said, and Ellie looked at me so startled, and so disappointed, that I decided I’d better just shut up and frost my cake.

“What business is it of yours?” said Martha, but then she said, “He’s not like that all the time. He’s a world better than my father. At least he’s no hypocrite.”

It was quiet for a minute, so quiet we could hear the bowling balls rolling down the aisles next door.

“My father was a sweet man,” said Ellie then, smiling that quiet smile of hers. She was making little doves out of frosting --lovebirds, she called them-- to add the finishing touches to a three-tier wedding cake she’d decorated the night before. “He bought me a bicycle for my tenth birthday, and bought one for him too, and we both learned to ride at the same time.”

I tried to picture Ellie on a bicycle but couldn’t.

“My father bought me a bicycle once,” Martha said, grinding out her cigarette on a saucer, “but he never taught me to ride it. That would have been something, if he’d done that. I took the bike out to the driveway and fell before I got to the end. Hit so hard it knocked out my front tooth.”

It was quiet again. Ellie stared at Martha in such a pitying sort of way that it annoyed me. She wasn’t the only one, after all, who’d had some pain in her life. I never even had a bike. I closed my eyes and tried again to remember the way my mother’s face

had looked the last time I saw her. Instead, I saw my father, chewing on a piece of wheat as he came up into the house, fresh from working the horses, sweeping an arm around my mother to kiss her in the kitchen. She'd laughed, thrown her head back and laughed from the belly, her hands messy with bread dough, and then she'd whipped the strand of wheat from his mouth and stuck it in her own.

"Who needs bicycles when you've got horses?" I said, more to myself than to Ellie and Martha, remembering when my father first taught me to ride. I was five or six years old, sitting in front of him on the saddle, held snug against his chest. My feet were too short to reach the stirrups even in the highest notch. I loved the dustiness of the horse, the smell of him, the flicking of his tail. My heart was beating so fast I could hear it.

"Don't be afraid," my father said. "Horses can feel it if you're afraid."

"I'm not," I said. He'd shown me how to hold the reins, and put his hands over mine to show me how to coax the horse in a direction without hurting his mouth.

"Little kicks," he said. "All you need is soft hands and little kicks."

"Horses," snorted Martha as she lit her next cigarette. "Your father should be ashamed."

I opened my eyes.

"What did you say?" I looked at Ellie, who flushed pink low in her cheeks and looked away.

"Your father is letting your horses starve to death," said Martha. "Everybody knows it."

I felt the blood rush to my face. "You don't know anything."

“I know that those four horses of yours are starving. I’ve never seen a horse’s ribs stick out like that,” she said. “He thinks because he lost his wife he can just let it happen. Way I see it, he lets his kids starve, too.”

“You shut up.”

“Your family’s a real tragedy,” said Martha. “Your Mama was something else, so pretty and so sweet, enough to make your teeth ache.”

“Stop it,” I said. The hand holding the knife started to shake and when I put the other hand down to steady it, my knuckles dug a deep groove into the side of the cake.

“And you, well, I think take after your old man,” said Martha. “You’ve got none of the prettiness of your mama and none of the guts of your brothers. You spend all your time pretending you’re the little princess of this sugar-shit world, just like your father.”

“Martha, I think it’s time you be going,” said Ellie from behind me.

“You trash,” I said. With my free hand, I dug a handful out of the already-ruined cake and flung it in Martha’s face, knocking the cigarette out of her mouth. “Your poor little rich girl story. Your thrift store dresses, pretending like you’re somebody. So your father let you get a tooth knocked out. That’s nothing. If you’re missing a tooth now, it’s because your drunk of a husband knocked it out, because he couldn’t stand to listen to the way you talk like you know something. You’re just plain trash, Martha Wilkens.”

“Ginny,” said Ellie, but I didn’t pay her any mind.

Martha put her hand over her mouth. Her face was smeared with frosting. Her eyes looked like they were going to bulge out of her head. The knife felt heavy in my hand, and I thought, had it been a knife with any kind of sharp edge, that I might be close to cutting her somewhere.

“He did, didn’t he?” I said instead. “He knocked a tooth out. And with a mouth like yours, you probably deserved it.”

“Ginny,” said Ellie, real low, “that’s enough.”

I was surprised to see the tears come up in Martha’s eyes, and even more surprised to feel tears in my own. “You don’t know anything,” I said again, throwing my knife down on the table.

Martha covered her eyes and bent over on the stool and sobbed. Ellie’s hand came down on my shoulder and when she looked me in the face I saw tears in her eyes, too. Outside I heard the sound of a train coming, moving up the tracks, calling out its low, deep music.

“Go out to the front,” Ellie said. “Sweep the floor or something.”

I went. I sat in the middle of the floor in the dark shop and listened to the train pass by, rattling the blinds against the windows, and I cried the bitterest tears of my life in those few minutes. I never knew there was that kind of meanness in me. Things inside me were on the move toward something that I didn’t know, and couldn’t come back from.

After I had dried off some, I went back into the kitchen. What I saw first was Ellie’s back, with the white butcher apron tied tight across her tee shirt, and Martha’s hands, which looked small and red against Ellie’s back. They were hugging. I went back to the counter, and picked up my knife to start frosting again. Martha and Ellie didn’t move. I couldn’t see around Ellie, but suddenly I had the idea that they might be kissing, standing perfectly still as Martha leaned against Ellie, their lips touching but not moving.

Then Ellie stepped back and put her hand to Martha's cheek, like she was calming a little child.

I turned right around and went back out to the front. I swept the floor again. I could hear them laughing at each other, and it wasn't Ellie's normal laugh, either, not that quiet laugh she had when I put too much frosting on a cake. It was a full-fledged belly laugh, combined with Martha's throaty choked up one.

When I went in there again, Ellie was making a bird on Martha's palm, slowly squeezing the frosting into a recognizable shape. The body, the head and neck of the bird. Then the wings, outstretched. One at a time. Martha was smiling. One of her teeth, the fourth or fifth one from the front, was gone just like I said, although I'd never noticed it before.

"There you go," said Ellie. "Your very own lovebird."

"Thank you," murmured Martha, and her voice was the nicest I'd ever heard it. Close to the Amazing Grace voice, I guess.

Martha left before her husband came to get her. As she went out I said that I was sorry, but she shook her head.

"Don't," she said. "I've had enough for an evening."

The house was the same when I got home that night, dark, broken down, in need of painting. My father was sitting at the kitchen table with his head resting on his hand. He looked up into my face. He looked better, his cheeks filled out some, a little bit of color back, so much better that I knew he must have been getting better for a while, and I hadn't noticed.

"You look like your mother," he said, "coming in like that."

“No, I don’t,” I said. “But it’s nice to hear a lie now and then.”

And then I was crying again.

“Ginny,” said my father, and made like he would stand. “Ginny, don’t.”

“Let’s go out and feed the horses,” I said.

His eyebrows lifted. “Tonight?”

“Yeah,” I said. “They look like they’re hungry.”

Under a bright moon, my father and I hurled pitchforks full of hay over the fence, finding a rhythm to it like a dance. The horses floated toward us from the back of the field, ears forward, listening to me talk into the night, telling my father how a woman makes a decent cake. They ate slowly, as if they were enjoying the flavor of the hay, because they lacked the strength to eat it fast. My father wiped sweat from the side of his face. He leaned over the fence to touch the horses. His hands moved across their necks to their sides, where he caressed the sharp bars of their ribs.

My younger brothers liked to say that they didn’t get to know our father until after our mother died. I don’t know about that. I don’t know if we can come to know each other that way, through the loss of pieces of ourselves. That night my father and I drew together, each bearing something of the same burden, and got a good look at each other. The Ginny my father saw looked like my mother, wise and womanly. The father I saw looked like a man who had decided, after a long while, to take care of his own.

“There now,” he said, his voice low as a lullaby as the horses strained to reach more hay. He looked over at me, his hair curling long over his forehead, messy, his eyes shining. “There now.”

I never saw Martha Wilkens again. She left town that night without a word to anyone. Tom Wilkens came in a few days later and asked Ellie if she knew where Martha had gone, and Ellie said she honestly didn't know, but hoped that he would never find her.

"I hope she'll go someplace warm," she said. "Someplace far away."

I liked to think that Martha went to Maine, about as far as a person can get from Eagle City. I liked to think that she hopped a train and set off across the country, hell bent on getting herself some good lobster.

Overnight it seemed I began to understand the nature of cakes, the careful combination of ingredients coming together, knowing its rise and settle, its smells, and then the movements of frosting and perfecting it. I learned to make my own lovebirds. I improved so quickly with the cakes that, before long, Ellie said she'd taught me most all of what she knew. In August she started paying me six dollars an hour, and Ellie decided to start teaching classes again. I was her assistant. I showed women in our neighborhood, so many of them newlyweds, how to put a pinch of salt into a cake to keep it from being too sweet. I walked the line of women and laughed over how much their roses looked like pinecones.

We were teaching one night, a few days before I started high school, when someone thumped on the front door, loud enough to ring the bell in the entryway. Ellie and I went out to have a look. There was nobody there, no woman waiting at the door with her arms hugged to her chest. On the top of the cement steps was the ugliest cake I ever saw. It was round, that much I'll give it, but lumpy, covered in some chocolate frosting that must have come from a can. The outside edge was lined with candles, which

flickered and sputtered in the wind, but none of them blew out. In badly drawn blue letters across the middle, it simply read, “Ellie.”

We both stared at it for a long time. It was beautiful.

“Ginny,” Ellie said to me at last. “Let’s take it in.”

I lifted the cake carefully and we walked it into the kitchen. I set it on the counter and Ellie slowly blew out the candles. The women taking decorating lessons didn’t know who sent it, but they understood, in that way that women do, that it was a tribute of the most precious kind. Their eyes were bright over it. Then we cut that cake up, and Ellie and me and the housewives of Eagle City each had a piece, one big circle of women, eating, in the kitchen at the Sugar Shell.

### **THIS IS MY IDAHO**

On the plane I see Idaho, for the first time, from a distance. At first I try to see my house, the long and straight country roads leading my eyes back to it, but it is too far. My parents will be driving back, the heater blowing on their faces. It is a heavy snow year, halfway up the phone poles. I hope they drive slow. I hope they miss me. It is twenty-two degrees below zero, says the pilot. At our destination, Sacramento, it is forty-nine above. I crane my neck to see out the window as the plane rises. The mountains, wearing their snow as coats on their shoulders, suddenly drop beneath a cover of clouds. Just like that, Idaho is gone.

I try to imagine California. I try to build some expectation. I picture my Sacramento relatives, starting with Aunt Diane. All I can conjure is my mother's eyes and short, frosted hair. I remember Uncle Chris' good-natured eyes, his jokes, his Old Spice which burns my nose when he hugs me. Then I think of my cousin Angela. I remember Angela best from one summer when they came to Idaho. They thought the fresh air might do them good. It was ten years ago. Angela was seven, and I was six. She was temperamental, quick to stomp her feet and pull at her hair, quick to scream, always the first to flail and kick and bite. She must have bitten all her cousins at least once, me probably ten times, because I was her favorite. But there were times under the

covers with a flashlight when we talked. She told me her father drank a little too much and her mother worked, both things I had heard of but couldn't wrap my mind around. I told her about how my pony Hoss stepped in a badger hole and broke his leg, and how my father shot him. It was my saddest story. We cried over it together. In the bathtub, we washed each other's backs and speculated about the lives we'd live someday. Angela had beautiful dreams. She was going to get married like Princess Di in St. Paul's Cathedral. She would hunt mummies in the heart of Egyptian pyramids. She would shoot in a rocket to the moon and make a face at Earth that people could see with telescopes. She had so many places she wanted to go.

I never saw her in Idaho again. But I am coming to her now at three hundred miles per hour, a silver bird zipping through the clouds. I am coming because it's my own dreams need patching.

This is California: Uncle Chris saying, look how big you've got, you're a young lady, and Aunt Diane saying, just look at your shoes, which makes me wish I had fancier shoes to wear in California. My shoes are white canvas sneakers from Payless with blue laces. I like my shoes until I get to California, where my aunt wears red heels and my uncle wears sandals, and Angela, standing in the airport, wears black boots with a heel that makes her almost my height. Then my shoes feel like Idaho.

Hey, she says. Her hair is long and dark, with heavy, straight bangs that end just above her eyebrows. She is not what I think of as a California girl, those Beach Boys girls with blond hair and tans and shorts that would embarrass my father. Her skin is white and powdery. She wears dark lipstick that looks purple, and her eyes, which are

the color of hot honey, are rimmed with black. She wears a black tee shirt and jeans, with her hands pushed in her pockets and her shoulders rounded forward.

Angela, I say, to make sure it's her, and she gives a little nod.

For my sake they buy McDonalds and eat it at the dining room table like a real meal. My mother always forbid us to have McDonalds hamburgers because they taste like wet cardboard and rot your insides, but on the second night I start to like them. The food makes me feel a moment of contentment I can't explain. I drink pop and scarf french fries and try not to talk about Idaho, where in the winter my mother makes steaming plates of meatballs and potatoes, food that warms you through. After dinner they watch TV. They have a TV in almost every room of the house. Aunt Diane goes into their bedroom to watch soap operas she taped earlier in the day. Uncle Chris watches 60 Minutes in the living room. Angela watches MTV in her room. I don't really like that kind of music; it lacks subtly, I want to say, but I'm afraid that will sound stuck up. I stick with Uncle Chris and his comments about how much the world has changed since he was a kid. I try to put music out of my mind.

The water when it runs over me in the shower smells like what we use to wash the windows at home and feels slick on my skin. Every night I sleep in Angela's room. She has a daybed with a trundle that pulls out, so I sleep a level below her, so close I could reach out and touch the long black hair that trails off the edge of the mattress. She smells like Noxema. She tells me all about her skin-care regimen, how she splashes her face with cold water to wake it up, how you should never squeeze a pimple. She says I have

good skin. I drink a lot of milk, I say, and she wrinkles up her nose and sticks her tongue out.

No offense, she says. Then she turns her back to me and says, Goodnight, Libby. See you in the morning.

Goodnight.

I listen to the rhythm of her breathing. I try to match it. To me, breathing is a kind of song that's always playing in the background. Angela's song is soft and slow, while mine wants to be fast. It wants to be Mozart. In the dark Angela's room is full of shadows. There are bars across the bottom of her window. I stare up at her ceiling, where longhaired men from rock bands stare boldly back. Under the covers my fingers drum out the notes of a song I can't play. I turn to Beethoven. I like his broodiness. I always close my eyes to play Moonlight Sonata, letting my fingers slip over the keys so easily, reach and reach for the notes. Beethoven wrote such lovely low notes, the kind that ache in my throat like loneliness. It's just music, I say to myself. It's just some old music. But I love Beethoven. He makes me want to cry and cry.

My aunt and uncle take me to the railroad museum in Old Sacramento. Angela prefers to stay home and watch TV. But you'll like it, she says, without enthusiasm.

I do. I love the trains, the huge glossy-black monsters of machinery, churning with noise. I flinch when the whistle blows, but I like it. A train is turbulent, like a heart. It reminds me of a photo of my mother getting on a train to meet my dad when he came home from Vietnam. She wears a yellow polyester dress, flowered, smiling in tears because she had a dream that he died there, in the jungle. She doesn't quite believe he is

coming back. She has fixed her blonde hair in curls that hug her shoulders. She has put on makeup that makes her look like a doll with pink cheeks. She clutches the suitcase with both hands, and smiles at my grandpa, who holds the camera. She lifts a hand to wave.

This is before I was born, before I was even a gleam in my daddy's eye, as she likes to tell me. But I was there. I was an egg rising in her belly. I was a spirit hovering in a cloud. I was waiting to be her daughter. And now I am standing in front of my own train, with Aunt Diane and Uncle Chris telling me to smile while they take a picture. I have left Idaho too.

Do you want me to take a picture of the three of you together? asks a woman in a red Nebraska tee shirt. My aunt and uncle look a little embarrassed, but they agree. They stand on either side of me, their arms awkward around my shoulders, and they smile. The woman fiddles with the focus. She takes a picture but the flash doesn't go. Aunt Diane has to stop and show her how to work the camera. Then we are all in place again, standing in front of a big black train.

Angela should be here, mutters Aunt Diane, as the flash blinds us.

When we get back to the house Angela is leaning against the kitchen wall talking on the phone.

Who's that? asks Aunt Diane in a sharp voice that makes Angela's shoulders stiffen.

No one, Angela says, putting her hand over the mouthpiece. Go away.

Who are you talking to? Aunt Diane asks again, louder.

I want to get out of there, but my feet don't want to move.

I have to go, Angela says coolly into the phone. She hangs up. She turns and fixes her mother with a steady cat-like glare.

Aunt Diane's face gets red.

It's no one, says Angela. It's none of your freaking business. Then she goes to her room.

Later I hear them talking to Angela about me. You have to try harder, they tell her, talking in low voices in the living room while I am reading one of her Glamour magazines in her bedroom. They underestimate my hearing. Go to the mall with her, they tell her. Take her to movies. Show her how much fun California can be.

California isn't fun, she says. It's lame. There's nothing good to do here.

But she decides to give it a try. That night she tells me about her boyfriend. His name is Troy. He is twenty-two, and he works at Costco by the mall. She met him at a party last year where she got drunk and puked on the coffee table. He took care of me, she says, smiling a little. She always smiles with her mouth shut, because she doesn't like her teeth. She thinks they are too big for her mouth, but I think they fit her face and her plump purple lips just right.

He held my hair back for me, she says. He's a good guy. She describes his hair, which is reddish and cut short so it spikes in front. It feels so soft, she says. I like to rub his head. He has green eyes and a crooked nose that he broke in a fight he had with a Mexican in the Costco parking lot. He wears a cross. Her smile widens. Sometimes, she says, I make him say Oh God.

There is a boy I like at school named Ben Miller. When I turned sixteen this fall he asked me to the Sophomore Sock Hop at Eagle City High School. He didn't have a car, so his mom drove us. Before the dance we stopped for dinner at Subway for sandwiches. I sat at the table with Ben and his mom and I thought he was the sweetest boy ever. At the dance he held my waist like I might break. I wondered if we'd get married someday, and we would tell our children about our first date with his mom.

I don't tell Angela about the marriage business. But I tell her about the dance. I tell her about Ben, who gets tan and beautiful after his summers in the potato fields. The tan makes his blue eyes blaze. It makes his teeth so white when he smiles.

Did you kiss? asks Angela.

No, but we held hands in the driveway. He walked me to the door.

Do you want to kiss him? she asks.

Sure, I say. I expect we will when we get the chance. He's in my Chemistry class.

Ooh, she says. Chemistry.

I don't know what to say to that.

So tell me about your piano teacher, she says, the one who died.

I close my eyes. I can see Mrs. Sims, her head with the halo of fluffy blond hair tilting toward mine. Her little slender hands winding the metronome.

She's little, I say. I never saw such a little woman. And she's always moving around except in those moments when she sits next to me at the piano. She has six boys: Randy, Scott, Joey, Peter, and the baby twins, Brett and Brian. She didn't mean to have

so many but she kept trying for a girl. The twins stretched her little belly out so much she had to get stitches to tie her muscles back up, and the doctors told her to stop trying.

I open my eyes. Angela has stuck balls of cotton between her toes and now she is painting them a deep purple, almost black.

She loves all things musical, I say. Her favorite is Mozart, and when I say that my voice hitches a little.

She likes them all, though. Chopin, Mendelson, Bach. And not only the classics. Last year she gave me the music from Man From Snowy River. That was good.

I try to laugh but it doesn't come out right.

She assigns me songs to practice with a check mark in the corner of the page, and when I play them for her, she writes 100 over the check mark, every time, and then she writes her initials, SS. Her first name is Shelly.

Was, says Angela.

What?

Her name was Shelly, she says. She's dead, right?

I see in her face that she's trying to help me. She wants to know about the day that Mrs. Sims died. She thinks I need to tell her. But if I say the words out loud, if I say them, I know I can't take them back.

I don't want to talk about that, I say. I'm sorry.

On Christmas day Angela gives me a makeover before we go to her grandma's house for the family gathering. It is Uncle Chris' family, not mine, and I am feeling nervous to be among strangers. I borrow a violet-colored sweater from Angela. It smells

like her. She says it's CK One. Angela blow-dries my hair straight, pulling and pulling with the brush til I think my hair will fall out. She combs it to fall down my back. She puts a butterfly barrette in the front to keep the hair out of my eyes. When she does my makeup, I feel even more nervous because I'm not crazy about purple lips, but she says she's going basic with me.

You've got a wholesome beauty, she says. We're just going to accentuate it. She stares into my face with such concentration that I look away. Her eyes are red. She colors my face like a canvas, applying violet to my eyelids, pink to my cheeks, soft brown to my lashes. She turns the TV on to MTV and bobs her head to the music as she works. I like it. I like what I see in the mirror when she finally lets me see. That girl, she looks sixteen and ready for anything. That girl looks good.

You should be a hairdresser, I tell her as she's painting my nails pink.

Maybe, she says. I'm sort of thinking about being a lab assistant or something like that.

Why?

Because you always get to know things before everybody else, she says, and for the first time I know that she is still dreaming, still thinking big.

At her grandma's house we open presents and eat turkey and listen to Christmas music on the radio. Angela's grandma turns the TV to a channel that just shows a log burning in a fireplace. The younger kids like to sit and watch it burn, but there is no sound of burning, no pops and crackles of flame, no smoke.

Angela is in a mood. She sits on the sofa for a while. I want to be loyal to her, a real friend, so I sit next to her. Plenty of people tell me I look nice, that Angela and I

look nice together. You can see a resemblance, says her grandma, and we are both annoyed. I didn't think we could look more different if we tried. I am skinny and stork-like and tow-headed next to Angela's dark, womanly beauty. But I thank her grandma for the complement. I tell her that Angela had a tough job, making me over. I try to make jokes about how dull and plain I am, being just an Idaho hick and all.

Angela leaps to her feet like I bit her and makes for the back door of the house, tugging me along by the hand. Her relatives don't look up. I can't believe that it is Christmas and we are in the back yard with the birds singing and green leaves on the trees swaying and little pink geraniums lining the fence. Angela lets go of my hand. She paces along the edge of the fence. She stops.

You need to keep a secret.

I nod.

You won't tell?

I shake my head.

I think I might be pregnant.

I stare at her.

I'm a week late. Usually we're so careful but there was this one night when we didn't have anything and Troy said he'd pull out, but he forgot.

Then she spills out talk of abortions, adoptions, open adoptions where they will send her pictures of the baby so she knows it's all right. She talks about keeping the baby, because that's natural. She could be a mother, couldn't she? She could learn to be a mother.

Sure, I say. But at the same time I am thinking that she is just a year older than me. That's no age, I think, to be a mother.

She starts to cry. She cries until gray rivers of mascara run down her cheeks. I want to hug her. I want to tell her that everything will be fine. But I've never been much for lying.

Troy's going to freak, she says.

I want to be like my own mother, so full of wisdom and comfort, so grown up.

You should tell your parents, I say.

She looks at me disbelievingly. Are you crazy?

They're bound to notice eventually.

Not if I get an abortion, she says, narrowing her eyes. You're going to tell them, aren't you?

No.

Yes, you are, she says. I can tell. You're this perfect little princess, never done anything wrong your whole life. You're this goody-two-shoes. You're going to call your parents and tell them that your bad cousin has gotten herself knocked up. And then your mom will call my mom.

No, I say. I just said—

I can't believe I told you, she says, shifting from one foot to the other like she has to use the restroom. She pulls at her hair. Inside me I feel a beating like a bird's wings. My nails are hurting the palms of my hands. I feel like this is the reason I had to come to California. I had to take this test. I am failing it.

I can't trust you, she says.

I won't tell! I say loudly. We both look toward the house but no one comes out.

You're a brat, I say to Angela. Screw the test, I think. I walk toward the house. I leave her standing there pregnant in the yard.

This is California: it is people with nut brown skin, and toast brown skin, and peach skin, and gold skin, and bronze skin, not looking at each other. On the bus to the mall there is a woman so black the light seems rush at her, only to bounce off. Her body looks weary from holding off the light so long. She holds her purse to her chest until it is her stop, and then she rises, so careful, so dignified, and glides to the door. I have never seen a person like her in all my life.

Another woman knits. She is a large woman with a broad, red face, and dyed blond hair. She doesn't seem to notice the bus at all. She just knits. Watching her makes me think of my mother crocheting our winter scarves, working every night through the fall so we'd be ready when the first snow fell. This year my scarf was blue, my favorite color. The woman is knitting a loop out of a pale lavender yarn. I lean over and ask her what she is making. Angela sends me a sharp look.

I'm making a sweater, the woman says.

For your daughter?

For my dog, she says. Her hands twist the yarn together deftly. She makes very neat, straight stitches.

I can't think why a dog in California would get cold, I say.

The woman stops knitting and looks at me.

Come on, says Angela, pulling on my arm. It's going to be our stop.

When we get off she walks fast, brushing past other people on the sidewalk. I have to jog to catch up. I say excuse me so many times.

You shouldn't talk to people on the bus, Angela says, suddenly pulling up short. She has not spoken nicely to me since Christmas. She has only agreed to take me to the mall because her mother made her. You don't understand, she says. There are freaks. Psychos. Scary people here, Libby. It's best not to draw attention to yourself.

She was making a sweater for her dog, I say, but I hardly think she's a freak.

You never know, says Angela.

She wants to go to Macy's. It is a huge department store with skylights and high ceilings where the sound gets trapped. It smells expensive. Angela moves through the racks pulling clothes off without hardly looking at them. I follow her, running my fingers through the soft fabric. Music pours from speakers on the wall. Pachelbel's Cannon in D Major. Chopin's Nocturnes, Hungarian Dances by Brahms. I stand there, caught by the music, until Angela pokes me in the shoulder.

Come on, she says. I want you to try some things on.

When I look at her I can't help but imagine beyond what I see. Under her skin. Deep in her belly, I see a secret life. I hear its tiny heart, the size of a sweet pea, beating for all its worth. That little heart murmurs a song of its own. And I don't think she hears.

In the dressing room she pushes a denim skirt at me that purposefully looks dirty.

Really? I say.

Try it on.

I turn my body away from her as I step out of my pants, but there is no way to stand, because of the mirrors, that she can't see and ridicule my straight, childlike body. The skirt is velvet soft inside. It ends just above the knee. In the mirror I see it shows a curve of my hip I didn't know I had.

What size of shoe do you wear? Angela says, looking me up and down like it's a business to be finding parts of me to make presentable.

Eight, I think. Eight and a half.

Try on the sweater with it, she says as she slips out of the dressing room door. I'll be right back.

I put the sweater on, grateful that she is not there to see my flat little breasts in their plain white bra. It is a material I have never felt before, something shiny and synthetic. The sleeves are a little too long, brushing my knuckles. The figure in the mirror looks out with a blank expression.

She knocks. She comes in without waiting for me to answer. In her arms is a large shoe box. She puts it on the floor, and lifts out black boots with a massive heel. I gape at her.

No way.

Trust me, she says.

Like I should trust a snake in the bushes, I think. But I shuck my canvas sneakers off my feet, pull up my socks, and zip into those boots. They fit like a dream. Between the boots and the skirt, there is just a little of my knee peeking out. I look tall, and slender, and grown up. I look like a woman. Over my shoulder, Angela puts her thumb to her mouth and bites on it.

Wow, I say.

Suddenly I hear Mozart floating down from the speakers. It is the song I was supposed to play the day Mrs. Sims died. Concerto No. 8 in C. I would know it anywhere.

I had my period, says Angela. I'm not pregnant.

I blink at her. I can't absorb what she's saying. I am hearing the song, its quick little notes dropping down on me like rain. The woman in the mirror blurs. I see a red door, the door of Mrs. Sims' new house. I stand at the top of the steps and ring the bell, which plays Beethoven's Für Elise. I hear her boys in the background, playing. Her footsteps approach the door. She opens it, smiles into my face, and leads me to her old upright piano, a piano she inherited from her grandmother, that crossed the prairie from Missouri all the way to Idaho. I sit beside Mrs. Sims. I open the music. She winds the metronome. And I play this song.

Only I didn't.

I'm crying. I lurch sideways, reach for the wall, cling to it.

Hey, Angela says. It's okay. Her hand hovers near my shoulder, but she doesn't touch me.

I cry hard. I drown out the song.

Libby, she says.

Now my nose is running, and I have nothing to wipe it with, and I start to choke with tears. Angela backs out of the dressing room, closes the door. I hear her ask the woman at the counter for a Kleenex.

Is the young lady all right? asks the woman.

She's fine. Her boyfriend broke up with her. She needs a good cry.

She comes back into the dressing room, holding a tissue. Sorry I was so rotten before, she says.

It was warm that day, I say. It was warm and the snow was melting.

Angela looks at me. Her hand holding out the tissue pulls it back in. She takes a deep breath.

I found Mrs. Sims, I say. She was dead.

This is my Idaho: it is a warm day in the first week of December. I walk because it is so warm. It's only a mile. Otherwise my mother would have driven me, but it is warm, it feels good to be outside. I come up the driveway. I see her dog at the bottom of the stairs, one of those wrinkly Shar-Peis from China. It whines at me. It is lying on a coat. But it isn't a coat. It is Mrs. Sims. She has slipped and fallen down the stairs.

My Idaho is a woman who fled her body on the bottom step of her house, slipping up to the dark sky where a new set of clouds were brooding. It is sheets of music strewn on the snow. It is a dog's whine. It is a word I whispered: Shelley. It is the sound of an ambulance changing pitch as it came. It is a song I never played.

We are both sitting on the floor of the dressing room. I wipe at my face with the Kleenex. I feel like I've been run over by a bus, squashed flat. But the song is over.

Phew, Angela says. I didn't know if you were going to make it.

You're a brat.

You said that already.

I'm sorry.

You look good in those clothes, she says. She's trying for casual and not quite making it, but I play along.

I have great taste, she says.

You should be a fashion designer.

Maybe, she says. Those are really great clothes. You should get them.

I look at the price tags. I laugh. The boots alone are three hundred dollars.

There's no way I could afford this, I say, struggling to my feet. In my head I begin to say goodbye to the boots. They hug my legs with a warm, steady hello. I don't want to take them off.

So what? says Angela. She smiles without teeth. Let's just walk out of here.

I watch her pile my old discarded clothes and my two Idaho raggedy shoes into the box she brought the boots in.

But I like those pants, I say. I got them for my birthday.

Don't whine. Let's go.

She tugs on my arm.

We're going to walk to the door, she says. It isn't that far. I do it all the time.

What if they catch us?

She sighs.

It will be the one crazy thing you ever did in your life.

You're so immature.

It took you all this time to figure that out?

We're out of the dressing room. The speakers are sweeping us with Rachmaninoff. Angela chats with me about some movie she wants to see. She stops occasionally to check out a shirt that catches her eye, a cute skirt, a belt she likes. She nods at a little boy who stares at us. She holds me firmly by the arm, like she's taking me hostage. She's going to bust me out of Macy's. I learn to walk in the boots. By the time we get to the door I'm a pro.

When we're on the street we both laugh.

You should be a therapist, I tell her.

Maybe, she says. She lets go of my arm. She moves quickly away from Macy's, mingling with the people on the street, keeping pace with them. I follow. We are invincible.

Come on, calls Angela over her shoulder, and she breaks into a run towards the bus stop. My heart is banging loud in my chest, like bongos, like an African rhythm, but it is slowing. I stand for a moment to watch Angela move down the street. People should stop to watch her. Her long black hair swings against her back. She runs like a natural. She is a sight I will never forget. She is California.

And I run after her, calling to wait up. The boots fly under me. I hear cars honking and a plane flying over, and somewhere a baby crying. The boots knock on the pavement with their tall wooden heels. I hear my breath come in and out of me smooth as silk. I am catching up with Angela.

I run as fast as I can.

### **ELLA BY THE POOL**

Ella loved to swim. Early in July, just after her eleventh birthday, she turned from her house every afternoon with a towel over her bony shoulder, flip-flops slapping the three blocks to the squat cement building that guarded the pool. Other children played at the pool; they screamed and splashed and pretended to drown. They wore flippers and swam with kickboards. Some kids, the young ones, wore life jackets or inflated arm bands, and floated wherever the movement of the water took them. Ella swam to make herself strong. She swam hard in straight lines across the pool, practicing the different strokes. She wore goggles so that she could open her eyes underwater and see the lines that ran along the bottom of the pool. During swimming lessons, Ella watched the muscles of her arms tighten and relax. She learned to cup her hands slightly to pull through the water faster, and timed her breathing with her strokes. Someday she might be a lifeguard, she thought, when she was big enough.

After the lessons, Ella watched the lifeguard, seventeen and beautiful, rub lotion onto her darkly-tanned skin. The lifeguard didn't swim. Mostly the lifeguard watched the boys at the deep end, who were kept slick and strong by the water. When she became a lifeguard, Ella imagined, she would pay better attention. She would watch people swim

all day. When the pool closed, she would climb down from the lifeguard's chair and practice her strokes in the empty pool.

The lifeguard had smiled at her father once, when he'd come to the pool with Ella the summer before.

"You look like a trouble maker," said the lifeguard. "I've got my eye on you."

Her father turned to Ella with a surprised face. "Can you believe that?" he said. "She thinks I'm a trouble maker." Then he tossed Ella up out of the water, making her shriek with laughter. "She's got her eye on me," he said, and then they splashed each other and tried to do handstands in the shallow end. Her father showed her how to turn somersaults. When she got tired, he rocked her in his arms like a baby, her head against his neck, her body held snug against his chest just under the surface of the water.

For Christmas that year her father bought her a heavy, hard-backed Webster's dictionary, because she was as curious as a cat, he said. Ella often looked up words she heard him use, ordinary words like "habit," which she recited for him like poems:  
*custom, regular way of doing something, because it is something you ordinarily do,*  
*special dress for horse riding, a drug you can become addicted to, headwear of a nun.*  
Her father laughed and clapped his hands at her performances.

"You are," he said, "the best girl in the world."

That past February, her father sat Ella and her mother together on the couch and told them that he loved them, but was going to live with someone else. "You're still my best girl," he said to Ella. Ella and her mother listened to the sound of his truck getting farther away. Then they went for pizza.

“Is it the lifeguard?” asked Ella as they sat in the back table of the pizza parlor, her mother dabbing at her eyes with a napkin.

“No, honey. It’s a woman from the office in Pismo Beach.”

Ella’s mother had once been a wonderful cook, but since her father left she seemed to burn everything. The smell of smoke hung constant in the kitchen, spreading out into the other rooms of the house. Ella ate bowls of cereal at the table all spring while her mother scanned the want-ads and made calls. Ella listened to her mother talk about herself like a stranger, list the things she could do and the places she’d been before Ella was born. “You can play Scrabble,” said Ella once, to help. “You can multiply twelve times twelve.” Her mother only smiled. She was solid and darkly beautiful to Ella, but not strong enough. She didn’t wear mascara anymore; she looked pale around the eyes. Her voice when she made those calls was higher pitched and louder than usual. It made Ella’s heart beat like Chopsticks on piano.

Summer was better. The swimming helped. So did long baths while her mother was making dinner. In the bathtub, Ella would huddle near the tap and put her hands out into the hot, streaming water as though she sat by a campfire. Sometimes she laid flat and let the water rise over her. She held her breath as the water moved past her nose and looked at her long brown hair floating around her like seaweed. She was a mermaid. She listened to her mother in the next room, the sounds intensified and contorted by the water: the stilted clatter of pot against pot, the muffled song, the cries that sounded far away.

After her fingers withered, Ella would wash quickly and pull the plug. She stayed with the water until it was nearly gone. Then she ran the tap cold and splashed her face. She lowered her head under the tap and let the water take her hair down the drain

clockwise. Shivers ran down her neck and back. Her hair struggled with the drain until she pulled free and wrung it out between her hands and then, every time, she would lift her hair to her face and smell it, searching for the scent of chlorine.

At the end of July, Ella's mother got a job with a company in Blackfoot, Idaho. They were moving to something like a desert but there would be a pool, her mother said. All the apartments had pools because it was so dry in Idaho, and not near any real water like the ocean.

"Water," Ella said. *"The colorless transparent liquid occurring on earth as rivers, lakes, oceans and falling from the clouds as rain."*

"You can have a pool all to yourself," said Ella's mother. "Won't that be fun?"

"If we move," Ella said, "how will Dad find us?"

Ella's mother didn't answer right away. She folded a sweater into a box marked for the Salvation Army, brushed a strand of long dark hair from her eyes, and closed the box, sealing it with packing tape. It was important Ella understood this: it would be better where they were going, they would be better, and there would be no coming back.

The sun was sinking fast when they pulled into the new apartment complex. The pool was tucked just behind the clubhouse. Ella had worn her swimsuit under her clothes all day. While her mother introduced herself loudly and signed papers, Ella palmed the pool key. She undressed in the clubhouse restroom and slipped out the back door into the pool area.

The pool was enclosed on three sides by a tall iron fence that felt like a cage. It was smaller than the pool at the community center but looked deeper. There was no one in the water. Ella guessed that all the children who lived in the apartments were eating dinner. She was alone. She closed her fingers tightly around the pool key.

There was an unfamiliar breeze blowing at her back as she came towards the water, a breath that was hot and yet so soft it stirred her hair and the surface of the pool only slightly. On the first step she stood to her ankles and took in the simple beauty of the water, its tiny rushes and retreats, the slurping it made at the edges like it was alive. The water's cool quiet moved up her legs. The noise of the day, the shutting of doors they would never open again, the roar of cars on the highway, the cardboard on cardboard bump of their belongings, her mother's on-the-road singing, the sounds of leaving a place and making another your home, were going into the water layer by layer, and waist deep they had faded to a murmur in her mind, no louder than the water's searching voice.

She looked toward the clubhouse but could not see her mother. On the wall there was a large sign with bold black letters: *Pool hours. 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. This facility does not employ a lifeguard. Swim at your own risk. Children under thirteen must be supervised at all times in the pool area.* A glare of sun reflected off the pool and Ella looked into it and then back at the sign. Orange and red lights floated over the words so she couldn't read them. "So," she said to the water, spreading her thin arms, "I've got a pool to myself."

She pulled her hair from its ponytail and stepped toward the deep end. At chest deep, she leaned back into the water to wet her hair. The sun was dropping behind the circle of apartments and a shadow was advancing across the pool, dividing it into light

and dark. Ella bobbed back to the line where the two met and tried to keep her balance. She tried to feel the difference in the water as the light left it. She laughed and heard her laugh come back to her off the crowded walls. She said her name loudly. She laughed again.

A sudden rustle surprised her. It was a small sound, but it seemed to have an echo in this place. Ella turned and saw a woman sitting in one of the white plastic lounge chairs near the gate, under the shade of a small maple tree that leaned over the fence. Her body, younger and firmer than Ella's mother's, was stretched over the edge of the lounge chair. She wore a modest navy blue swimsuit with white trim and sunglasses set up against her blonde hair. One knee was lifted and bent slightly to fit the chair, and in her lap she held a large leather-bound book that she was reading.

Ella didn't have the pool all to herself. She closed her eyes and wished the woman gone. She opened them again. The woman was still there, and looked as though she meant to stay. A small plastic table was pulled to the side of the woman's chair like a bedside table. On it was a lumpy straw-colored bag and a bottle of water, half gone.

"I didn't you see before," Ella said. "I wouldn't have been so noisy."

The woman reached for the bottle of water and took a long drink, then went back to reading. Ella watched her. The shadow had come farther down the pool and Ella felt a shiver come up her back but she didn't move into the sun. She was caught in the center of the pool, watching the woman with the book read. She studied the movement of the woman's eyes. There was something strange about the way she held her head, as though she was looking at Ella without using her eyes.

"Well, since I'm not alone," Ella said, "I'm going to swim."

Ella swam four laps. Australian crawl, like she had learned in swimming lessons. She practiced her breaststroke. Sidestroke. Lazy backstroke from the deep end to the shallow. On her back, she watched the woman with the book lick the tip of her index finger quickly and turn the page.

It was getting dark when Ella's mother came to find her. She was with the landlady, a short and sturdy gray woman who held a blue towel over her arm that Ella recognized as her own. Ella swam to the edge of the pool without being asked and started up the ladder.

"My little fish," said her mother, pulling Ella's hair into a thick rope and squeezing the water from it.

The landlady offered the towel to Ella with a wide smile.

"Kids always love getting wet," she said.

Ella's mother read the sign and frowned. "I'm breaking the rules already, even though Ella's a good swimmer."

"No," said Ella. "There was that lady."

She pointed across the pool at the woman with the book. The woman stood up and stretched her arms above her head. Then she gathered her things, book and water and sunglasses, into the straw bag, opened the gate in the fence, and began to walk quickly away.

"That's Ms. Foster," said the landlady.

"Thank you for watching my daughter," Ella's mother called out across the pool, but the woman with the book kept walking away.

Ella said, "I don't think she's a person who talks."

“Can she hear?” asked Ella’s mother, turning to the landlady.

“She’s a quiet one,” said the landlady. “Her husband and little baby boy died in a car crash about a year ago and she hasn’t talked much since then. Most people have never heard her say anything at all.”

“How terrible,” said Ella’s mother, reaching to draw Ella to her. But Ella was still staring in the direction the woman had gone. This was a sad story, she thought, sadder even than her father leaving her. It involved days in hospitals and moments in churches and graveyards. It involved loneliness of a kind that Ella was just starting to know.

“She’s a good woman,” the landlady said. “She’d make a fine lifeguard. She doesn’t talk but I think that she can swim.”

During the day, while her mother was at work, Ella went to a summer daycare center down the street. On bad days, the children huddled around the television while Ella sat in a corner reading her dictionary. On good days, everyone crowded around a table and made decorations from colored construction paper. Ella taped her creations on the walls of her new bedroom: a whole school of blue and green fish, a purple octopus, a red crab, starfish and pieces of seaweed and clam shells. She was making her room into an ocean, a piece of California in Idaho. At ten after five every day, her mother would pull up to the curb where Ella was waiting, and they would drive two blocks to their apartment and microwave dinner.

Ella’s mother was not better in Idaho. She gained weight in her face and circles under her eyes. Instead of cereal, they ate diet TV dinners in small plastic bowls, and instead of reading the want ads, Ella’s mother called people in California and talked in

the loud voice about how happy she and Ella were. Ella always ate in a hurry and changed into her swimsuit, then waited by the door until her mother judged that enough time had passed for her to swim. She ran as fast as she could most of the way to the pool, but as she neared the gate, she tried to quiet her breathing and walk in slowly, without making any noise.

The woman with the book was always in the chair near the gate when Ella got there, and she was always reading the same book, her place held by a silver bookmark. Every day Ella bee-lined to a chair across the pool and laid her towel across it. She kicked off her flip-flops and untied her hair, then descended the ladder and pushed herself to the bottom. She liked the rough gravelly concrete against the bottoms of her feet and liked to look up through the water to see the sky from there, blue and quivering. She spent the first part of her time in the pool diving for things: pennies and soda caps, bobby pins, bracelets, and one time, a set of keys that she later dropped into the office mailbox. By doing this, she felt like she was contributing.

When the sun got low enough, Ella went from diving to swimming frog style across the pool underwater. She waited until the pool was half in shadow, half in a gold glow, and then she swam into the shadow and back. She paid close attention to the moment when the water became cooler and the way the coolness seemed to creep over both the pool and her body, little by little.

After swimming laps, Ella floated on her back and watched the woman turn the thin pages of the book, slowly and carefully, as if the pages might disintegrate under the sun. The woman never said anything, just read and turned pages and drank from her bottle of water. Sometimes she would stop reading to watch the last of the sun fall

behind the row of apartments. When she did this, Ella talked to her, just in those few minutes that she felt like she wasn't interrupting.

"I'm Ella," was what she said at first. "My mom and me just moved from California. It took us ten hours to drive here."

"I was at the sixth grade level in swimming class, even though I'm only in fourth grade," she said another time. "I'm going to be a lifeguard someday."

"My mom's name is Janice. My dad's name is Jerry. Sometimes I wish that my name started with 'j' too, so we would all go together. My mom says that I'm named after a famous jazz singer. My dad says I was a little white ella-phant."

The woman never answered her, but Ella knew that she paid attention, by the way she seemed to listen so carefully, and looked at her out of the corner of her eye when she thought Ella wasn't looking. In this way, as the weeks passed slowly, Ella felt that she and the woman were becoming friends.

Sometimes she tried to think of the woman as "Miz Foster," turning the name over in her mind the way that the landlady had said it. During the day, Ella imagined the accident that had killed Miz Foster's husband and baby. A car accident. Maybe a drunk driver speeding out of nowhere, the sound of metal against metal. Miz Foster screamed and bit off her tongue as the drunk's car hit hers. Inside Miz Foster's mouth, Ella imagined, her tongue was bandaged like an arm that'd been amputated.

Ella was thinking about the word "amputation" (*to cut off, cutting off*) while she waited on the curb for her mother at fifteen after five, hugging her dictionary to her chest. Stormclouds brewed overhead, making everything seem different than usual. Maybe it

would rain. It had rained a lot in California, she remembered. As the cars went by she looked at the drivers' faces and wondered which of them would be capable of robbing a woman of her voice. Then she thought she saw her father's tan truck turning a corner, and her father's face inside it. She waved but the man in the truck did not look in her direction. Then he was gone.

Ella ran the two blocks to the apartment. She came upon her father's truck in the covered parking space next to her mother's car. She ran to the door of the apartment and laid her hand against it and steadied her breathing. She knocked. There was no answer. Ella opened the door. In the living room her parents were sitting on the couch in dim light, holding hands. Her father stood up and smiled his easy smile at her, his hand slipping from her mother's so quickly that Ella thought she might have imagined it.

"Hello, honeybee," he said. "We were just about to come get you."

Ella's eyes moved past her father to the white papers that gleamed on the coffee table, to her mother, who clutched the edges of her wrinkled white shirt together and smiled.

"You found us," said Ella, looking again at her father.

"Let's get dinner started," said her mother, standing.

There were two steaks in the freezer, and Ella's mother thawed them in the microwave and cooked them on the stove, cutting the smallest one in half for Ella and her to share. Ella peeled potatoes and opened a can of sweet peas, she and her mother standing close in the kitchen, their eyes moving often from their work to where her father reclined on the couch watching television. The apartment filled with the smell of

cooking meat. They worked quickly as though her father might go away again if he got hungry enough. Ella set the table with trembling hands.

“This is great,” her father said as he ate, shoveling big bites of food into his mouth. “I haven’t had a meal like this in a long time.”

“Neither have we,” Ella wanted to say, but she knew her mother wouldn’t want her father to know about all the burnt meals, the ruined pans, the giving up and eating from the microwave. She sat at the table with her ankles crossed and tucked under her chair, the way the woman at the daycare told her that ladies behave. She unfolded her napkin into her lap.

“What did you do today?” her father asked, as if the three of them sat down to dinner every day. They stared at him. He was halfway through his steak already.

“Aren’t you going to eat anything?” he said.

Ella swallowed a mouthful of peas.

Ella’s mother looked flushed. She kept cutting her meat into smaller and smaller bites. “Today, I learned how to use the fax machine,” she said.

Ella thought about the television programs she’d watched at the daycare. She had eaten a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for lunch, which had too much peanut butter. She had looked up the word “amputate,” which was short and unsatisfying. None of these things seemed right to tell her father. She needed something that would make him stay.

“I have my very own pool,” she said. “Do you want to see?”

“I’d love to see,” he said.

“You two should go swimming after dinner,” said her mother, “although it looks like it might rain tonight.” She smiled at him and took a first bite of her steak. He smiled back, but the smile didn’t stay long on his face.

“Do you think a person could drown in rain?” Ella asked her father.

“Maybe,” he said. “If it rained enough.”

“I don’t see how a person could drown in rain,” said Ella’s mother, and gave a short, false laugh. “Honestly.”

That was the difference between her parents, Ella thought, right there.

“I’m done,” said Ella, setting down her fork and laying her untouched napkin over her plate. “Can I go change now?”

“Go ahead, honeybee,” said her father. “I’ll catch up with you.”

In her bedroom, Ella held both her swimming suits to her body, first the old purple one that she had worn the day she and her father had played at the community center, then the new gold one her mother had bought her when they moved. She could change things, she thought as she struggled into the purple. She could talk to him.

Ella didn’t bother to slow down as she ran up to the pool gate. “My dad’s come back,” she said to the woman with the book. “He’s going to come swimming with me.”

The woman stopped reading and sat up. Then she closed her book.

“You don’t have to leave,” said Ella. “It’s just my dad. I want you to meet him.”

The woman put her water bottle into the straw bag.

“You can’t go until my dad gets here. I can’t swim alone,” Ella said.

A corner of the woman's mouth turned up. She leaned back again in her chair and reopened the book. Ella dove and treaded water until she was tired. It was almost dark already. Ella floated on her back in the small rectangle of light, turning in a slow circle, and imagined her life in this place with her father. Her mother would stay home again with Ella. Her father would watch the news on TV before dinner, like he used to, and after dinner they would all swim in the pool, her mother and father and even Miz Foster, and they would play and splash each other and laugh.

The gate banged shut. Ella smoothed back her hair in the water and turned. Her father was still dressed in his faded pair of Levis and his favorite blue tee shirt, which brought out the color of his eyes.

"I've got to get on the road," he said.

Ella didn't answer him. Across the pool, the woman with the book was as still as a statue, not even her eyes moving.

"They have a hot tub," said her father, smiling, looking around. He didn't see the woman in her chair. He walked around to the clubhouse side of the pool and bent to dip his hand into the hot tub. "Be careful of hot tubs, Ella. The filters could catch your hair. I saw a story about a little girl who drowned in an older one of these a few weeks ago."

"Dad," said Ella. She wanted to ask him to stay. She had thought that one word would be easy for her. Now she couldn't say it.

"What?" His voice became strained.

"What's she like?" Ella asked. She swam to the edge of the pool near him and looked up. He squatted next to her.

"Who?"

“The other one.”

“Her name is Katie,” he said after a moment. “She has long brown hair. She likes to read. She’s a vegetarian. She’s too thin. Her house is on the beach. She loves to swim, in the ocean.”

Ella glanced over her shoulder at the woman with the book, who still did not move.

“Katie’s like you,” said her father.

Tears pricked Ella’s eyes.

“Do you love her?” She stared at the stubble on his face and remembered the way the bristles felt under her hand, the way she had once loved to touch them.

“Yes,” he said.

“Then you should go be with her,” said Ella, and turned toward the other end of the pool and pushed off from the side. The woman with the book raised her head then, and looked her in the face. Ella tried to keep her strokes even so that she could see the woman’s eyes as she swam across the pool. Holding her head out of the water like that felt strange. She let herself go under for a moment, then came up sputtering. Chlorine burned in her nose. She heard her father’s voice pleading with her, asking her to get out of the pool now and say goodbye. He would call more, he said. He would buy a plane ticket so Ella could visit the house on the beach. He was sorry, he said at last. He didn’t mean for this all to happen.

Ella waited for him to go away. It was dark. She swam to the shallow end and tried to sit on the bottom and hold her breath in intervals until he went away. Her mother

came and stood next to him and asked her to come out in a gentle voice but Ella did not look at her.

“She’ll come in when she’s ready,” said her mother. They walked to the gate. “You’d better get back to your hotel now,” said Ella’s mother, her voice thick and low, “or that woman will worry.”

Ella watched them walk away. The woman with the book was still there, in the dark, the book open in her lap. A strong wind started to blow, bringing the smell and grit of the sagebrush. Ella wondered if her father had gone. She climbed the steps out of the pool. She had forgotten her towel. She shivered in the wind, and wrapping her thin arms around her chest, she walked slowly to the hot tub. Tiny drops of gray began to form on the concrete.

Ella lowered herself into the hot tub. It was too hot to be comfortable. She fought the urge to pull her hair out of the way of the filters. She closed her eyes. She saw her father in his blue tee shirt walking away. She saw her mother’s sad smile. She sat Indian style on the bottom, where the bubbles tickled her feet. If her hair caught, she imagined that Miz Foster would save her. She imagined the woman’s long legs would stretch to run toward her, the brown arm dipping into the water to pull her out. She held her breath until she thought her lungs would pop. Then she raised her head above the water and saw that the woman was still sitting with the book open in the rain. She looked up as Ella got out of the hot tub, but then looked away quickly. Ella felt empty.

“I’m going to be quiet, like you,” she said to the woman. Then she ran home across the wet grass, her legs and throat aching.

Ella went straight to bed. Her father lived on the beach. In the morning she would take down the paper fish and shells from her walls. She had not taken a bath; she smelled like chlorine and desert dust and rain. Her father lived on the beach with a woman named Katie who liked to swim in the ocean. Who was like her.

The next morning she did not say a word at breakfast or at daycare all day. At dinner she and her mother sat in silence at the table and ate leftover steak and peas. Ella filled a glass of water from the sink and drank it down with the sense that she was becoming like it. It rained heavily that day and Ella's mother would not let her go to the pool.

Her mother got out a puzzle and they sat at the kitchen table together, finding edge pieces.

"You want to talk about your father?" said her mother.

The puzzle was a picture of the Golden Gate bridge. Ella focused her attention on finding pieces with cables and wires in them.

"I know it hurts," said her mother. "It hurts me too."

Ella thought of the way her tongue might look severed from the mouth. The two sat on opposite sides of the table, their hands moving back and forth across it.

"Sometimes you're so sad that you decide you don't want to talk," her mother said. "Like the woman by the pool. But things will get better, Ella, in time."

After they had given up on the puzzle, Ella stared out the window in the direction of the pool and imagined that the woman with the book was there, even in the downpour, reading as the pages grew limp and the ink ran. Perhaps, when there was no one to see

her, the woman would lay the book aside and dive into the pool, swimming under the water in a straight line as drops of rain made circles on the surface.

Overnight the rain stopped. Ella returned to the pool at sunset. The woman with the book was still reading. Everything was the same: the black leather book, the sunglasses pulled up against her hairline, the bottle of water half gone. But the air smelled like rain. It was still overcast, the clouds shades of purple and pink that Ella couldn't remember seeing in California. The woman with the book was looking up often at the sky. Ella looked to her usual chair across the pool but chose instead the lounge chair closest to the woman's. She laid her towel across the chair carefully, and sat, trying to tuck one leg up the way the woman did. She leaned her head back and looked at the woman. She had never seen her so up close before. The woman was tan as buttered toast, and her silvery blond hair was braided to her waist.

Ella had brought her dictionary. She opened it across her knees and flipped through the pages until she found the word she wanted: pool. *Small lake. Area of water or other liquid. Enclosed tank of water for swimming. Common supply of money/food, etc., for a group of people. Group where people share facilities.*

She looked over at the woman. She tried to hold the dictionary in just the same way as the woman held her book, gently, supporting the binding with her fourth and little finger. She watched as the woman turned a page, and tried to turn the pages of her own book the same way, slowly, carefully. Any minute, she imagined, the woman would glance over at her book. She wouldn't have to speak, but if she would just look over Ella would know that she was interested. Her look would say, "What is it you're reading?"

and then Ella would turn her book so the woman could see the word, “pool.” Then the woman with the book would smile, imagined Ella, and they would continue reading until it was too dark to read.

But the woman with the book did no such thing.

*Poop*, Ella read. *High raised stern of a ship.*

She looked over again at the woman. The woman looked up at the sky. She closed her eyes, and Ella admired the dark gold color and thickness of her lashes.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get to meet my dad,” Ella said.

The woman’s eyes opened.

“I tried not talking but I’m not good at it.”

A corner of the woman’s mouth turned up again, and then she turned her face away and coughed.

“I memorized the definition of water, last year, and this year I think I might memorize the definition of pool,” said Ella.

She stretched out her arms and turned the book toward the woman, who read the definition slowly. Then the woman turned her own book toward Ella, and Ella read the words, *You are beautiful, O my love, as Tirzah, lovely as Jerusalem.*

Ella looked in her dictionary for the word “Tirzah” but didn’t find it. *Titivate*, she read. *To make yourself look smart.* She flipped closer to the beginning of the book and looked for the word “beautiful”: *Very pleasing to look at.* She showed the word to the woman.

The woman flipped through her own book, then stopped and leaned over to let Ella see what she had found. *He has made everything beautiful in its time.*

“Everything?” said Ella.

The woman looked away. She closed the book and dropped it by the side of the chair. Ella felt like she'd been holding her breath a long time. It was perfectly quiet except for the lapping of the water against the side of the pool. The woman's hand rose to her face, touched her lashes, dropped. Ella felt the ache come back into her throat, and she thought that maybe this time, it was the woman's ache that rested there.

“It's okay,” Ella said. “I won't make you.” She set down her book and jumped into the pool feet first, looking up as the water closed over her head. The chlorine burned her eyes. Her hair floated around her. She swam frog-style across the pool, blowing out bubbles. She came to the surface for air. The woman with the book was not reading, but watching her swim. Ella dove. She thought of her father again, and for the first time she pictured Katie, the woman like herself, swimming in the ocean, her long brown hair spreading out behind her.

The sun peeked out from behind a cloud. The water flashed like slow motion blue lightning, she thought. She liked the words. She swam until it started to get cold and then climbed the steps at the shallow end, out of the pool. She walked to the edge of the woman's chair.

“Are you okay now?” she said to the woman.

The woman looked at the concrete and nodded.

“The other day, I thought maybe I would get my hair caught in the hot tub filters and someone would have to save me,” said Ella. “You would have, wouldn't you?”

The woman swung her legs around the side of the lounge chair and sat up. She pulled something out of her bag, something that shone pink in the fading light.

It was a pair of silver sewing shears. The woman held them up in the light and opened them. Ella moved around the chair to stand next to her, and reached out and traced the edge of the scissors with her finger.

“What’s this for?” Ella asked.

The woman closed the scissors and put them in Ella’s hand, folding her fingers around the handle. They felt delicate and cool, yet strong enough to cut through wire, and very sharp. The woman looked over Ella’s shoulder at the hot tub.

“You brought this for me,” said Ella, as the woman’s intentions dawned on her, “in case I get my hair caught?”

The woman stared for a moment into Ella’s eyes, then let go of her hand. She moved soundlessly back to her chair.

Ella laid the scissors at the concrete near her feet. She gathered her hair, squeezing the water from it so hard it made a slapping sound on the cement. She separated the slippery weight into three large strands and began to braid, quickly. Her hair was about the same length as the woman’s, she realized, although her own hair was thicker, sturdier. Ella picked up the scissors. Then, holding the wet braid to the base of her neck with one hand, Ella closed the scissors on it. It cut easily, the ends of hair falling over the top of her hand. She opened the scissors again, sheared away the next fourth. Two more times and her hair came free, and without hesitating Ella walked to the edge of the pool and cast the braid in. She watched it spiral clockwise down to the drain.

The woman picked up the book and the straw bag. Then she left Ella alone by the pool. Ella watched her walk away, a tall blonde woman in a blue swimming suit, heading off across the grass in long, determined strides. Ella turned back to the pool, where the

severed braid swayed against the drain. Her hand rose and fingered the ragged ends near her neck, already drying in the breeze. She shook her head. She was weightless.

## EVIDENCE

The missionaries ate lunch at my house on Saturdays. They didn't bother to preach to me anymore; they just came because we were the only family within miles that wasn't Mormon. They were from Virginia and South Carolina, southern Mormons, they said, and I said, why does the church send missionaries from far away to come here, where everybody is already Mormon? Couldn't they send you to South America or China or something? They just hung their heads then, and said that God wanted them in Rigby, Idaho. Now, I never considered myself a religious woman. My idea of God was that he lives in a deep sort of quiet that a person feels sometimes. The missionaries seemed to know something about it, but when I got to asking one of them, he didn't answer in a way I'd expect. It was my husband who really shed some light on it for me.

Eddie and I both quit smoking on account of our daughter. Eddie came in the kitchen one morning and saw Sybil, who was four years old at the time, sitting in the middle of the linoleum with an unlit Marlboro in her mouth. She was taking long, pretend drags, holding it like Eddie does, flicking away imaginary ashes. When he saw that, Eddie said he would never smoke another cigarette. He said we were going to give a better life to our kids. So we gave away all our cigarettes and Eddie shampooed the car.

He cleaned out the ashtray and started to keep change in it, which we saved every week to go to the drive-in, Sybil and Eddie and me, all clean smelling and sweet.

About two years after that, I was getting ready for work one day and my car wouldn't start. Eddie was gone already, so I ended up having to walk. I worked at the Philo T. Farnsworth Television Museum in Rigby. Once I got there, I called up Eddie at the shop and told him to come pick me up. Eddie took a look at the car and said it needed a new battery, was all, like I was a silly woman for not knowing these things. But then he noticed that the exhaust manifold had a crack all the way down it, and that was going to need some fixing. It may take a few days to get in a new one, he said.

The next morning I drove Eddie to work, so I could have his car for the day. It was a slow day at the museum. The museum is a bad idea, I think, because no one knows where Rigby is, and no one knows that television was invented in Idaho, and no one cares about Philo T. Farnsworth. But some people see the sign on the freeway and they stop on their way to Yellowstone, so in the spring and summer, business is usually okay.

That day we had three visitors. One was an old lady with a scraggly white dog. She looked like she might have been old enough to know Farnsworth, back in 1928, when he was really cooking. I was supposed to tell her that no dogs are allowed in the building, but what's the point, I thought. No one's going to care. Her visit was pretty uneventful until her little dog took a dump right on the foot of the Farnsworth statue. She apologized and then hurried out. Just when I started to clean up, a Mexican came in.

“This where they invented TV?” he asked.

I said, "He invented it," and pointed at the statue of Philo. I was rusty at the presentation, it being early in the season and all, but I remembered the first part. "He was the first to make an all-electronic television system."

"Cool," said the Mexican. He was wearing a clean white tee shirt and black jeans, and his hair was combed in slick lines. A strong cologne was rising off him. He wandered all over the museum. He liked to put his hand against the glass and his lips moved when he read. "I'd like to be an inventor," he said after a half hour or so. "I bet this guy made more money than was good for him."

"Probably," I said, "but he was always fighting RCA for his patent."

"His what?" said the Mexican, and we looked at each other for a minute, wondering who was bullshitting who. "This is a nice town," he said, as a complement to me. "Quiet."

"So quiet it'll seem like noise, you stay here too long," I said.

"I just got my G.E.D.," he said. "I'm out to see some things before college."

"Go southeast," I said, "to Grand Teton. They have a tram you can ride near to the top of the mountain. You could see the world from there." I told him to backtrack down the freeway until he hit a gravel road on the left, which would eventually turn into the old Ririe highway. I walked with him to the door, then off he went in a new-painted blue Chevy Impala to Jackson Hole. I watched him drive off towards the hazy mountains in the distance and I thought that it had been a long time, too long, since I had been there.

Back then, Rigby only had the one Arctic Circle in the way of fast food, so that's where I went for lunch. I sat in the drive-thru in Eddie's car and ordered a cheeseburger and fries.

“Four dollars and four cents,” the kid at the window said. I had a five. I didn’t usually get change from the ashtray, but four cents wouldn’t really make or break us, I thought.

And that’s when I found it. Lying innocently on top of the change in the ashtray was a little white cigarette. A Virginia Slim was my guess. It was half-smoked, and when I held it up, I saw a ring of lipstick on the edge. When I saw that lipstick, everything in me seized up. Then I thought of the little pistol Eddie kept on top of the entertainment center, and I thought about which parts of him I might like to shoot. We had spent ten years together and now some Virginia Slim floozy was blowing smoke all over my Eddie, ruining our chance for a better life.

I heard myself say the word, “no.” I wanted to drive like crazy out of there, make the tires screech. There was a car in front of me and one behind, so I ordered a chocolate milkshake. When they gave me my order, I went back to the museum, although what I wanted to do is drive to Quickie Automotive and look my husband in the eye. Instead I sat in the office with Philo and ate my cheeseburger and cried a little and pounded on my desk and tried to think of what to do.

Most people would probably think I jumped the gun. One little cigarette might not mean he’s gone and slept with another woman. But most people don’t know Eddie like I do. When I saw that cigarette, I knew. Eddie always told me everything, down to where he went to lunch every day and how much money he spent. He told me what cars they worked on and how much they charged. He told me the dumb things his coworkers said and the way his boss said, “Fine work today, Ed.” He would tell me about the little

cigarette unless he had something to hide. There wasn't another explanation. I just knew it, low in my stomach.

Around three or so I saw Elder Hahn, the Mormon missionary from South Carolina, coming up the street alone. This made me suspicious because missionaries are always in pairs. I don't think they're even allowed to go to the bathroom alone. Elder Hahn came in the museum and stared at the statue of Philo T. Farnsworth.

"I've never been in here before," he said, "but I read about Farnsworth in school last year." I was reminded of how young he was, to be in high school last year.

"Where's Elder Smith?" I asked him.

He flushed and said, "He's back at the apartment. I'm supposed to be studying scripture, but I needed some air."

"The air in here's pretty good," I said, but he was staring at the plaque at Philo's feet.

"Born in Beaver, Utah, 1906," he read.

"I've never been to Beaver," I said. "But then, I've never been much of anywhere."

"And then he ended up in Idaho, inventing the television," said Elder Hahn.

"God works in mysterious ways." When I said that I felt hard, that cold kind of mad working its way up from my stomach to my throat.

"What he did was a miracle," said Elder Hahn. "The difference he made."

"He was just an inventor," I said, staring up at Philo's face, which had always looked smug to me. Like he knew it all.

"No," said Elder Hahn. "He was an instrument, of our Heavenly Father's."

Elder Hahn was fixing the statue up to be some sort of Mormon hero, and I didn't know if I could stand it, of knowing something ugly and having to hold it all in. So I went ahead and said it.

“Philo T. Farnsworth invented TV when he was twenty-one. He spent nearly the rest of his life depressed and ornery with his wife and drinking himself to death. I don't know what it takes to be an instrument of God, but I'm sure that's not it.”

Elder Hahn stared like I'd sprouted wings from the shoulders and flapped around the room. “Are you joking?” he asked in a funny voice.

“They don't put that stuff in museums, but it's true,” I said. “He was always griping about how there was nothing good on TV. He didn't even watch it.”

Elder Hahn's face went white, then red. His hair was that yellow-white color that most kids grow out of, and the red made his eyebrows stand out. He sat down hard at the foot of the Farnsworth statue and stared at me again.

“I don't think I wanted to know that,” he said after a few minutes.

“My husband's cheating on me.” The words came without me thinking much, and the minute I said it my life seems solid, like concrete being poured around my feet.

Elder Hahn looked embarrassed. He started to say something, then stopped. He looked like he might cry. Then he lifted his hand up and looked at it all puzzled and said, “What's this?” and before I had a chance to look, he wiped the dog crap on his pants in a big long smear that showed in spite of his pants being black.

I decided to get off work early and bring Elder Hahn home for a late lunch. He hid in the bathroom while I worked the crap out of his pants, and I gave him an old pair

of Eddie's until they were dry. Then Elder Hahn and I sat around the kitchen table and ate tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, and I told Elder Hahn, whose real name, I found out, was Steven, all about my situation with Eddie. I even showed him the cigarette.

Steven seemed to have gotten his composure back, because he just listened and didn't even question how I knew. He was breaking all the missionary rules, being alone with me. On the loose from his mission, hiding out, Steven seemed different to me, more human. He leaned back in the kitchen chair and stroked his chin a bit, like an older, wiser man, and when I was done ranting he said, "It sure would be a shame to ruin a whole family over one little cigarette."

"I don't want to be one of those women who just takes it," I said, looking out the window where the birds were going on about spring. "What would you do?"

"I might hit him," he admitted, rubbing his chin again. "My sister's husband left her right before I got my mission call, just packed up his stuff and left, and I wanted to clock him right on the nose, maybe even break it."

"It'd feel good, but I can't see how it'd feel better," I said.

Steven started to soak up what was left of his soup with his sandwich. "I don't know. We're supposed to say that families are forever, but it's hard to know what to say when they're not."

"What about God," I said. "Did he say anything about what to do when something like this happens?"

Steven laughed with his mouth full. "Maybe you should ask him yourself," he said.

We watched as the bus came up to the house and Sybil got off. She was wearing the little yellow corduroy jumper I sewed for her this fall. She waved at her friends as the bus pulled away. She looked so nice as she came up the steps, so clean and rosy-cheeked, shiny like my porcelain figures that I could put on the shelves and keep safe.

“Hi Mommy,” she said, and she hugged me.

Sybil always liked Steven the best out of the missionaries that came. He had a real way with her, talked to her like she was a grown-up, but played around like they were both kids. He had a sister about her age, he said once, name of Sarah, and sometimes I’d catch him calling Sybil that. That day, the two of them went off into the living room to watch the afternoon cartoons, leaving me in the kitchen to ask God myself. During the commercials I could hear Steven laughing with Sybil, and she was joking right back. I sat at the kitchen table and turned that Virginia Slim over in my hand. I thought about Eddie, about how the front of his hair was going gray already. I thought about the way he smelled like grease and paint when he came home, and how that smell filled the house. It would be time to pick him up soon.

“So what do you think?” I asked the fan, which whirred noisily above the table. It didn’t answer. So I put on my windbreaker. I couldn’t think what I would say to him. I couldn’t imagine what he’d say to me. I put the cigarette into the inside pocket of the jacket and stood for awhile in the door to the living room, watching the cartoon animals move around the screen. Steven looked at me over his shoulder.

“You going to go get him?”

Right then I knew the answer to his question.

“No, I’m going for a drive. Would you watch Sybil for a bit?”

Steven ruffled Sybil’s hair and she smiled. “Not a problem,” he said.

“He’ll be mad, from having to walk home,” I said. “And you’ll probably want to put on your own pants. They should be just about dry.”

Steven turned red again. He rubbed the back of his neck. I told him that he didn’t have to stay, that I could take Sybil along with me, but he said that I should be alone for a while to sort things out. He said he could handle it.

“He won’t yell or anything,” I said, “not with Sybil right here. He’s not that kind of man.”

“Good,” Steven said, and laughed a little. “But I might be in less trouble if I go back with a black eye.”

I tested around for that cold mad feeling, and found it still there, but it had gone down some. There was a worse hurt rising up. “You can let him wait awhile, before you tell him I’ll be coming back,” I said.

But I wasn’t sure of where I was going, and so I couldn’t know, not really, how long it would be before I came back.

When I hit the gravel road the feeling almost choked me, and I pressed my foot down close to the floor, sending chunks of rock everywhere, raising a big cloud of dust behind me. I was going to chip the paint. I had the windows rolled down and gravel jumped like popcorn into my lap. My hair blew sideways across my eyes and mixed with my tears, and the lump in my throat burned and would not go down.

The gravel road ended at the smooth black Ririe highway. I felt better once I got to it. It was a nice drive, fields of green wheat on either side that rolled like waves on a sea, the mountains getting closer and closer, blue and dreamlike. I felt like I was going on vacation by myself, which I had never done in all my life. In the town of Swan Valley, I stopped for gas at a place that sold square ice cream cones. I got two square scoops of rocky road, which I paid for with change from the ashtray, and I ate in the car without feeling guilty. From Swan, I wound through the hairpin turns up towards the mountain pass that overlooks Jackson Hole.

I got a few miles before I lost the radio. The quiet set in. It was the deepest sort I'd ever felt; like breathing dust, it made me want to cough. I thought about Eddie and Sybil together. Her birthday was coming up, and Eddie had bought her a bicycle. It was pink. I knew she would go wild when she saw it. The three of us would stand in the driveway, Eddie's smile the widest, then Sybil's, then mine. She'd have her long fingers clutched tight around the handlebars. Eddie would put an arm behind her back, like he's about to push her forward. I'd be standing there watching the two. I'd be the one taking the picture.

Then it felt like God was there, like he hadn't been in my kitchen. He was like a hitchhiker I picked up. God didn't promise things were safe, he reminded me, even though I wanted to think they were, the way I thought my wheels would hold that mountain road. There was a sign that warned, "beware of falling rock," and nets people had cast over the mountain to keep it from crumbling onto the road. Still, a boulder could fall right on your car, God said. Cigarettes wouldn't matter much then. Bicycles wouldn't either.

“Fine,” I said. “That’s fine. What else do you want? I might end up hurting him, you know. But I’ll stay with him if that’s what you want me to do.”

Fine, said God. He talked like someone from Idaho, and not the ritzy parts. The way he said that word “fine,” meaning so many things, like enough, suit yourself, and like good china you don’t use, and like a fee you’ll have to pay for breaking some rule. That’s just fine, he said, and I knew what he meant.

Eddie and I usually got our picture taken at the pass next to the sign that says, “Howdy stranger. Yonder is Jackson Hole, last of the Old West” with a picture of a cowboy pointing into the valley below. I wished I had a camera. I’d have someone take a picture of me and God.

I’d been away from home two hours when I drove through Jackson Hole. By the time I stopped at the first stoplight, God had gotten out of the car. I thought I saw the Mexican’s Impala parked in the square, and I saw him, white tee-shirt and jeans, shiny black hair, standing in line for the Silver Dollar Bar as I drove by. I honked a few times before he looked over.

“It’s me, the Philo T. Farnsworth lady,” I yelled out at him.

“No kidding,” he said. “Come to check on me?” People were staring at us, and I liked the feeling. I had the urge to do something that didn’t make sense. Stopped at this stoplight, shouting to a stranger, was almost better than talking to God.

“You want to come in for a drink with me?” said the Mexican.

“I want to be on the other side of the mountain range before the sun goes down,” I said. “Are you going to be here awhile?”

“Could be,” he said. “Depends how I feel in a while.”

“Maybe later,” I said, and waved at him, and kept driving.

At the booth to get into Teton National Park, I realized I’d left my purse on the kitchen table at home. Behind me, a car with California plates honked as I rummaged through the ashtray, counting the few nickels, dimes, and pennies that I didn’t spend on the square ice cream cone. There wasn’t enough by half. I pulled up to the window slow and looked the ranger in the eye.

“Mister,” I told the man at the booth. “I only have two dollars and forty two cents and it’s mostly in pennies. I’ve driven two and a half hours to see these mountains, and if I don’t see them, I don’t know if I’ll be all right.”

“Lady,” he said to me. “You go right on in.”

It always startles me, the moment when you can first see the Tetons. You’re driving and then you come up over a ridge and there they are, the valley stretched out in little streams and wildflowers and these jagged snowy mountains breaking through the clouds. The sun was setting behind them. They’re like kings, these mountains. It’s hard at first to tell which one is the Grand. They are all grand, and enormous, and wild. I drove straight through the middle of the valley along the edge of these mountains, until I got to Jackson Lake. I parked the car by the boat dock. The lake was so clear it looked like two sets of mountains kissing. There was no one parked there and no one fishing, and the water smelled cold and dangerous.

When I was fifteen, I came to this lake with two friends: one from back east who was wilder than sin itself, and one who I met at my mother’s church. The wild one took

one look at the lake and just had to get in it. We explained that it was glacier fed, but she ran down to the water tossing off her clothes. An older couple was walking along the lake and pretended they didn't see her naked tattooed backside as she dove in. We, too, turned our eyes away, laughing nervously.

"This is what I call living," she yelled out to us. She swam for a minute, then rushed out and shook like a dog. She put on her clothes and we hiked up into the woods. "Feel my arm," she said. I put my hand to her wrist and it was cold as ice cream. She looked clean and flushed and free.

Now I sat on the hood of my husband's car at the edge of a lake, watching the way the light was being cut by the mountains into red and gold ribbons that reflected back off the water. It was hard to tell the difference between sky and earth. I had been thinking, ever since I left the house, about swimming in the lake. It was something I'd always wanted to do. It was freedom, I thought, and that's what I thought I needed. And then, when I started to take off my shoes, I heard a boat at the far end of the lake, powering toward me. It was a fancy type, and as it came I saw the people in it, bloated in their life vests, laughing into the wind.

I put one foot down into the water and a shiver went through me. I decided right then that swimming in ice water was no longer my idea of free. I had come to this place to clear my mind, to find an answer, to decide on a course of action. I shouldn't have come, I thought. From now on my vision of this land would be tainted with Eddie's affair. I took the cigarette out of my pocket. I looked at it. Who was she, this woman? When I thought of her I couldn't help but picture a thinner, blonder version of myself. She is more exotic, I thought. She is more beautiful. I imagined her leaning into a

mirror, pressing red onto her lips, smiling at herself knowingly. Then she smiled at Eddie, and he smiled his shy smile back at her. He offered her a light. They leaned toward each other. I imagined her lips tight around this cigarette, drawing my husband in. Drawing us all in.

In the Silver Dollar Bar, the tops of the tables and counters are lined with thousands of silver dollars, most of them over fifty years old and no longer shiny. The walls are covered with stuffed deer and elk heads, a weird herd of mismatched animals that stare the drinkers down. The Mexican was sitting at the bar. When he saw me, he hopped off his stool with his bottle of beer and slid into a booth. I sat down across from him.

“I knew you’d come,” he said.

“How old are you?” I asked him right off.

“Nineteen,” he said, looking pleased with himself.

He was the same age as Steven, I thought.

“I must look older,” the Mexican said, proudly raising his beer in a toast.

“This isn’t the sort of place that asks that question.”

“I’ll drink to that,” he said, grinning. He drank. He cracked his knuckles. “Can I buy you one?”

I’d never liked beer. It had always tasted to me like what I imagined pee would taste like. Ever since I’d had that thought, it was hard to drink, even when I was trying to be sociable. But here, I thought, things could be different.

“Sure. From the local tap,” I said.

“Where are you going, after this?” the Mexican asked.

“Home,” I said.

“It must be so great,” he said, stopping to wave at a waitress and order my beer.

“You get to come here whenever you want.”

“It’s okay,” I said.

The Mexican took a long drink and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “I was thinking about Yellowstone National Park for tomorrow. Get me some pictures of buffaloes.”

“Be sure to see Old Faithful,” I said. “You can’t go to Yellowstone and not do that.”

The waitress set a mug of beer in front of me, and I smelled it. Beer always smelled better than it tasted, like it was going to fill up the empty spaces.

“Tell me more about Philo T. Farnsworth,” said the Mexican.

“He was real young, younger than you, when he had the idea for TV,” I said, taking the first drink of my beer. It was bitter, but after that it had an almost pleasant, buttery taste.

“How young?”

“Fourteen,” I said. “One thing I’ll give him, he knew how to stick with a thing until something happened.”

This wasn’t what I expected, drinking beer with the Mexican in the Silver Dollar Bar, a place I hadn’t been since I was his age. I don’t know what I expected, maybe just some wildness, but neither he or I seemed to have any. Here I was talking shop. I told the Mexican all the good I knew about Farnsworth, about the invention of the blacklight,

the incubator, right down to the way he'd tried, in those last thirty years, to make a machine that got electricity from the same process that powers the stars. The Farnsworth Fuser. When I said those words, the Mexican leaned across the table and looked at me like it was the best story he'd ever heard. It felt like reading to Sybil, and suddenly I missed her. I finished my beer and started on another. I talked and drank until I was sleepy and relaxed and sad. The more I drank, the more it felt like I was never going to be able to go home again.

"What's your name?" I asked the Mexican, and swallowed a mouthful of beer hard, to push back the lump that jumped up in my throat.

"Jesus," he said.

"No kidding," I said. "Do people expect you to be good?"

"No," he said, and raised an eyebrow suggestively. "But I think I get away with more."

"Well, Jesus, I'd better get back to Rigby before I get too drunk." I stood up.

The kid looked surprised. "I thought we could go to Yellowstone together."

"Oh now," I said. "You don't need a guide."

He smiled and knocked back the last of his beer. "I like Idaho," he said.

"You're in Wyoming now, kid, but that's almost as good."

We said goodbye and shook hands and then I was off, driving slowly back over the pass. It dawned on me that Jesus had never asked me for my name. Somewhere along the way, between the top of the mountain and Swan Valley, I felt God in my car, hanging out for a few minutes like some sort of ghost in the back seat, keeping me awake. But he didn't say anything that time, and neither did I.

When I came in the house, Eddie and Steven were sitting on the couch in the dark, watching TV. Eddie was drinking a beer, Steven a caffeine-free soda. Steven was still wearing Eddie's pants, and when I came in and turned on the lights, he jumped up and grabbed his own from the back of the recliner.

"Sister," he said, nodding at me. He swung the pants over his shoulder and walked to the door. Then he turned and looked at Eddie.

"Goodnight, son," said Eddie. "Come back if they give you any trouble."

Steven went out the door and down the street, whistling to himself. Eddie and I listened to him go. Then Eddie switched off the TV. He stood up and looked at me, his hands shoved into his pockets, and then he sighed. He had a deep purple bruise on his left cheek, close to his ear, and a black eye.

"Nice shiner," I said.

"Kid's a boxer."

"I'm a little drunk," I said, although I didn't feel it. "Maybe we should wait to do this until morning."

Eddie sat down on the couch and I stood a little ways off.

"So you're drunk," he said, not looking at me.

"I had a few beers, is all."

"The kid said you found something that proves I'm an adulterer," said Eddie, his mouth twisting up. He was never one to beat around the bush.

I put my hand into my jacket pocket, where the cigarette felt oily and full of anger and eagerness. I looked at Eddie hard, then pulled the cigarette out and held it up. "You

want to lie to me now?" I said, waiting for his face to fold into itself the way it does when he lies, waiting for him to reach out with his ready-made explanation.

Eddie stared at the cigarette. He made a sound that was like a laugh. Then he bent his head and looked into his lap. "I swear to God," he said, and his voice sounded choked. "That's over now."

I felt dizzy. My stomach lurched. I wondered what he would do if I threw up on him. Until that minute, I really hadn't believed in my heart that Eddie'd done anything wrong. All the other things, the conversations with strangers, the hours on the road and by the lake, the silver dollars in the smoky bar, it all seemed like a dream to me next to Eddie on our couch, telling me that what he'd had with the Virginia Slim was over.

"I should leave you," I said when I could talk again. "How can I not leave you?" I wanted to curse him, to beat at him with my fists, to hurl his clothes out on the front step and wake the neighbors with my screaming. I wanted to be strong. Instead, I put my head in his lap and pressed my ear to his knee, as if I could stop him from being something different than I knew. We sat like that for a long time. Eddie petted my hair. I smelled the grease on his hand, from the places it stuck under his fingernails, and the sharpness of that smell comforted me.

"I've been thinking about God today," I said. "I feel like someone's there. God, you know, because who else could it be? And today I asked him if I was supposed to leave you."

Eddie leaned over to look in my eyes. His face was streaked with tears. I'd never known Eddie to cry, not even when his mother died. It made me feel, for the first time, like I didn't know him at all. "What did he say?" said Eddie.

“He said, ‘fine.’ That’s all. And then he left.” I untangled my arms from around Eddie’s legs and got up to sit on the couch next to him. “What do you think of that?”

“I don’t think much about God,” said Eddie, not meeting my eyes. “I know that people call God a father, and I try to picture him that way. Maybe he thinks about me the way I think about Sybil. She might act up now and then, piss me off a little, but I love her. I want to be with her. That’s what I want to think about God.”

It wasn’t the most profound thing I’d heard Eddie say, but when he said it, I looked at him and still saw a good man.

“Please,” he said, his face flushed.

I put my finger to his lips.

“Don’t,” I said.

And then I said, “Okay, fine.”

I reached into his pocket and pulled out a lighter, a Zippo I had given to him as a wedding gift. I got up and went out to sit on the front step. Eddie followed. I tried to smile at him but he was crying, big silent tears, his hand shaking as I gave him the lighter. I put the cigarette to my lips, and he lit it. I drew in deep, the warmth, the sweet ashy taste, the feeling I hadn’t indulged for two years. I blew it out slow. Over us the clouds moved past the stars. I handed the cigarette to Eddie, who smoked and cried. We passed the cigarette between us. We sent the smoke in plumes up to that quietest place, higher than the sound of the cars passing on the highway. Like a smoke signal, I thought. Like a smoke signal to God.

In bed that night we lay with only our feet touching. I slept hard all through the night, and when I woke up, Eddie was standing by the closet putting on his jeans.

“Where are you going?” I asked, sitting up. “It’s Saturday.”

He slid his belt through the last loop of his pants, and carefully cinched the buckle tight. “I thought we might take Sybil to Yellowstone,” he said.

That day we drove the car so close to a buffalo I could have put out my hand and touched its shaggy side. Eddie and I watched Sybil look at buffalo and elk. At the Old Faithful Inn, Eddie bought us butter pecan ice cream cones, which we ate as we walked around the geyser basin, looking at the smaller geysers and hot pools of colored water while we waited for the big one, Old Faithful itself, to go off.

A small crowd of people lined the wooden boardwalk, waiting. Eddie put Sybil on his shoulders. I stood back with the camera. The people around us began to cheer as a huge spray of white water shot up into the air, higher and higher until it mixed with the clouds. It had a rhythm to it, a speeding up and slowing down that you couldn’t quite follow. Eddie, Sybil, and I had seen it before, maybe ten or twenty times, but we couldn’t take our eyes off it. It was a miracle, every time.

“I wish it would last forever,” said Sybil. She knew, as I did, that in just a few minutes the water would start to go down and down until it was gone. All that would be left was a bit of steam rising from the hole in the charred ground.

“It will come again,” said Eddie. “We just have to wait for a while.”

I zoomed in with the camera on the way Sybil held her father’s head between her hands, not to hold on, but just to touch him. She was not afraid of falling. I knew that after I got it developed, that picture, Sybil riding Eddie’s shoulders, the white plume of

Old Faithful in the background, would find a place on the wall of our home. I knew that when I looked at it I might see what held our family together.

## BEAUTIFUL

My sweetheart then was a girl from down the street named Lucy Boone. Lucy loved horses. She used to stand out on the road whenever she saw someone on a horse coming and beg a ride. Then her father got embarrassed and bought her a horse of her own, paid someone to come out and show Lucy how to care for it, how to feed it, brush it, saddle it, ride. The Boones lived on two acres, which Lucy's dad planted with alfalfa to feed the horse. Lucy's horse was a shining black mare named Beautiful. I think it must have had some other name, the kind of name given to expensive horses, but Lucy called her horse Beautiful and loved it to pieces. She rode it down to my house to show me.

"I feel like Joan of Arc," she said. I will always remember her sitting up tall on that gorgeous horse, stroking its neck, telling me that her horse Beautiful made her feel strong and beautiful herself. I didn't have the slightest notion about this woman named Joan of Arc. I saw only Lucy. She wore black cowboy boots with a leaf pattern embroidered on the sides, a gift from her mother meant to correspond with the horse. Her glossy gold hair was braided like an Indian princess. Her glasses caught the sun.

"She sure is a beauty," I said from the porch. I whistled at the horse, who turned its bright, intelligent eyes to look at me.

“Wait one minute,” I said. I ran into the house and filled my hand with sugar from the sugar bowl. As the horse licked the sugar from my hand, its soft whiskery nose returning again and again, I smiled up at Lucy. I had already decided I loved her. I was thirteen then and had decided that I would marry Lucy Boone when the time came. Until then I was determined that her horse should like me, so that Lucy would love me. It’s still hard for me to describe that kind of certainty. She was the first girl who was kind to me, and for that reason I loved her in the way I thought a man loved a woman.

I met Lucy when her family moved to Idaho from California. For the first couple of years I didn’t pay her any mind. Lucy’s daddy was an engineer at the nuclear plant out in the Arco desert. Her family went to some fancy church with lots of colored glass in Eagle City, and she was not what you might call popular. She wore huge, thick glasses, and kids were always calling her names, four-eyes, froggy, coke bottles. But Lucy was a lady, and took it like she didn’t hear what they said. I thought maybe through those layers of glass Lucy Boone didn’t see that my teeth were crooked as sin, that my coat was full of holes, and dirty, that my mama only hacked at my hair when it got shaggy enough that people at church started talking. Lucy got on the bus one stop before I did, and she always sat in the second row, up near the front where the heater blew across her knees. I sat in the front for about a mile until it was safe to move to the back of the bus. It was during that mile, one day in second grade, that Lucy gave me a car. It was a Matchbox Ferrari, red, her brother’s cast off. She just turned around and slipped its slight weight into my hand as the bus turned onto Coltman Road.

“Well,” she said, “Drive it.”

I looked at the little red car shining in my hand, then squeezed my fist around it. It was cold and sharp as disappointment. "I won't ever own anything like this," I said. I didn't know why I would tell her, who I considered at the time a high faluting sort of girl, anything so close to my heart. She smiled her quiet smile, pushed her glasses back up her tiny nose.

"If you want it bad enough, you will," she said. "If you pray."

I stared through the glass into her deep blue eyes. The big church she went to in town with the stone columns out in front was as mysterious, foreign a place as I'd ever seen, and so were the prayers said there. Lucy looked back at me, blinking her solemn eyes slowly. Her lashes were tipped with gold. In that moment I saw her as beautiful. To make myself stop staring at her, I laid the car on the edge of the back of the bus seat, between Lucy and me, and pushed it along, making the noises of acceleration.

After she came to show me her new horse, I went out to the back pasture and looked over our horses. My family had kept a few horses since I was little. My father must have kept them around as part of his image. My mom told me once that he had tried rodeo as a young man. The horses served us no real purpose as far as I could see; no one in our family seemed to enjoy riding. They were another chore to be done. The horses were fat and unruly, prone to kicking at us, and I suspect my father beat them a little when we kids weren't around. Until that moment I had hated the horses, muttered threats about the glue factory while I heaved hay over the fence for them. But now Lucy had a horse. And I had a horse too, and it was one thing, maybe the only thing, I thought we had in common. I found a dandy brush in the barn. The horses came right up to the

fence when they saw me coming, but turned quickly away again when they saw I had no food to offer them. I was finally able to get close to one, a blonde, chunky monster named Buck. I started to work the brush over his coat. He bit me, hard, on the shoulder. I kept brushing. I kept thinking about Lucy astride that black horse, looking at the world from there like it was a new place. I smiled at her golden image in my mind.

That day my dad came home from the bank a beaten man. We children pressed our ears against their bedroom door, listening to him tell our mama that he was selling the back forty to a neighbor of ours, so that we would not lose the house. Each child took this news differently. For my part, I was glad, and ashamed to feel that way. The farm was dying. You'd have to be blind not to see it. It struck me that maybe the best thing to do was to give it up and get on with what our lives would be after the farm. Maybe we could rent a place in town. Maybe my dad could get a job at the jerky factory, or the sugar beet plant, or my mom would go back to school like she'd talked about, become a nurse.

At the same time, I felt my father's sorrow like a bruise in my side. He would be crushed by the loss of this land; it's where he found his worth. He would suffer. I searched inside myself for some kind of real pity for him, for love. I didn't find anything but a fear for the family in general, for mom, for my brothers and sisters, and for me. My father had become a dangerous, hard man. He was not, in spite of what people at church said when I was growing up, a good man, and he was not, as they would remember him later, a good man gone wrong. For a year he had secretly taken to drinking. We all knew it, my mother best of all, but we hid it. We hid the marks he left on us and the things we

saw him do in the middle of the night, when he thought we wouldn't be there to watch. We shivered when he came in with the smell of whiskey on his breath. Where had he gotten it, we wondered? Liquor wasn't an easy thing to get hold of in a town like Eagle City. Did anyone see him, standing somewhere with a bottle in his hand? In the dark, listening, we prayed for silence. We prayed for discretion. We folded our arms, tucked our chins in to our chests, and prayed that the Father in heaven would heal our father or hide him. The last thing we needed was for our dad to be thrown out of the church. The last thing we needed was to be told that the next world would be worse than this one.

"Take heart," my mama told my dad, in the quiet of their bedroom. My sisters started sniffing. Then through the door we could hear the sound of my father crying too, harsh sobbing from the back of his throat, a jagged sound I will always remember.

"I would give you the world," he said.

"Oh now," said my mama, shushing him. "Take heart. We will overcome."

I walked down the hallway to the room I shared with my brother Lee. There was a mix of lightness and heaviness in me. I knew the future. Piece by piece my dad would sell our land, until there was only the house. Change was coming, and I rejoiced, because it meant that things would be different. I would take heart if my father wouldn't.

The next afternoon Lucy and I rode down Ellis Lane, a dusty irrigation road that stretched between two property lines between our houses. It was a pretty road, with wide views of the nearby alfalfa fields, tall lines of cottonwoods on either side, a place where all the irrigation canals came together at the end. There was always the sound of moving

water. Lucy rode Beautiful and I rode my horse Buck, both at a slow, swaying walk, so we could talk. In the saddlebag I had packed a watermelon I stole out of the refrigerator, some napkins, and a pocketknife. I wanted to surprise Lucy with as much of a picnic as I could manage. I could not get the word girlfriend out of my head. I wondered if I could make her happy. She seemed so content as we rode, her shoulders relaxed in a way I never saw her at school, her eyes behind her glasses bright.

“Oh Henry,” she teased. “Look at your shoe.”

I held out my foot where the sole of my boot had separated from the rest, flapping every time the horse picked up his pace. “I like to get a little air to my toes, is all,” I said. The boots had been Nathan’s, my older brother, and Peter’s before him. And after me they would go to Lee.

“I’ll bring some glue, next time,” she said. “I’ll fix that right up for you.”

I smiled at her. “That’d be nice.”

We rode for a moment in quiet.

“My dad is selling some of our land,” I said to her. Something in me wanted to share everything with her.

“Is that a good thing?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Not really. We just need the money.”

Lucy didn’t seem to know what to say to that. Worries about money were not on her horizons. She leaned forward and stroked the neck of her horse, murmured something endearing to it. I’d been meaning to ask her to the church dance on the Saturday after school started. It was more than a week away, but I was still trying to

frame the question in my mind. How would I ask her? How could she say yes?

Would her parents even let her go?

We reached the end of the lane, where there was a small dusty clearing under the cottonwoods. There was the remnant of a campfire there, a party thrown by the high school kids in the area. There were a few soda cans in the weeds. Lucy swung down from Beautiful and I followed her, tying our horses to a fence near the alfalfa. Buck turned his back to Beautiful, his tail swishing. He didn't like her. Buck was a farm horse, big, bulky and cantankerous. Beautiful was a sleek, lithe little riding mare. They were like a different species.

Lucy's favorite spot was on the other side of what we neighborhood children called the River Canal. To get there we had to traverse a line of pipe that crossed the big canal, a strong, deep channel that smelled of the Snake River. It was delicate business crossing this makeshift bridge, where one line of water crossed over another. The piping was covered with railroad tar, so it was impossible to put your hands down to go across on all fours. You had to stand and balance, then cross, one foot in front of the other above the dark swirling of the canal. Lucy put her arms out like a tightrope walker and fairly danced across the pipe. I followed her, trying not to look down the few steps it took to get to safety.

On the other side was a patch of wild roses, and a fallen tree that swung its branches over the water. Lucy liked to perch on the trunk and throw rocks down into the water. In this place she liked to be quiet. Only the best thoughts, the most profound, were permitted in this place. As a result I often felt I had nothing to say to her here. I sent words to her silently. I love you. I love you. These were our best conversations, the

words that I replayed in my mind at night, calling up my *I love you*'s in different tones, hearing her say, *I know*.

It occurred to me then that this would be a good time and place for actual words. I should ask her to the dance, but I couldn't put the words together in my head. Instead I snapped a little dry branch off the tree. I dipped its end into the dark green water, fighting the water's power, then let it go. Lucy and I watched it float downstream, toward my house, toward the fields my father had just sold.

"Make me a crown," said Lucy. She started to take off her shoes. She looked across the bank to see her horse standing placidly near the fence, lifting its head to look back at her. I set to making a laurel of wild roses. I pricked my finger on one of the little sharp thorns and held it to my mouth so Lucy would not see the blood. When I was done with the crown I set it carefully on her head, where it looked hung loosely on her shining hair, already coming apart, wilting under the sun. Lucy put her feet in the water.

"Thank you," she said.

"You look like a queen," I said, shocking myself that it came out in real words. Lucy's face changed, her brows coming together, her little pink lips pursing slightly.

"What is it?" I asked. I felt I had somehow offended her.

"Would you look at me, tell me what you see?"

I smiled at her, mock punched her in the arm. "I see you all the time."

"No," she said. "Without my glasses."

She took her glasses off. She folded them carefully and felt along her jacket until she found her pocket to put them in. With the glasses out of sight, she turned to me.

"What do you see?" she asked.

What I saw first were the red marks pressed on either side of her nose by the glasses. Already the marks were fading into a slow red that was coming into Lucy's face. Her eyes looked huge to me, unnerving in their lack of focus. They were cornflower blue, warm and steady against the green movement of the canal, the cold clearness of the blue sky over us. Behind us, in the reeds, a red-winged blackbird started to call its song. Lucy could not see me. She scooted along the trunk of the tree to get closer. She lost her balance for a moment, almost toppling into the canal, but I reached and caught her. She clutched at my arms with both hands. Her face loomed close to mine.

I thought about kissing her. My mouth went dry. I had never kissed a girl before, had no real idea how such a thing was done. My lips were chapped. I smelled of horses and hay. She was so close I could see a pulse beating in her neck. I could draw her close to me, angle my head so our noses wouldn't bump together, press my lips over hers. My breath hitched in my throat. I could kiss her, tell her without words how sweet I found her. But the moment was passing me by.

"What do you see?" she asked again, more insistently. Something about the loudness of her voice made both horses look up from where they were eating.

"I see your eyes," I said, looking from her well-deep eyes to her little upturned nose, her tight uncompromising lips.

She frowned.

"I see you," I tried again. Outright panic was welling up in me. I wanted so badly to tell her what she wanted to hear.

Lucy tried to look at me. One of her eyes moved out of alignment with the other. Her face was a deep red now. Then she pushed at me, backed off. She reached into her pocket and unfolded her glasses in a businesslike manner.

“I see a pretty girl,” I slipped in before she got the glasses back on her face. It wasn’t what she wanted. She didn’t meet my eyes.

“It’s okay, Henry,” she said. She patted my arm, tried to show me she wasn’t angry. But she was. She was reaching for her shoes. “Let’s go home.”

“I brought some watermelon,” I said, remembering.

“I just want to go home,” she said.

All the way back along the road I tried to think about what she wanted me to see in her that I hadn’t already. At the end of Ellis Lane we were supposed to go our separate ways, me to the south where the farm and the chores waited, Lucy to the north to her fancy white house that lay back from the road with her father and mother and brother inside probably waiting around the dinner table. The sun was setting behind the mountains, and a cold, autumn wind picked up and blew at her loose hair. She hadn’t spoken to me on the ride back. The ears on her horse were going every which way, trying to get a feel for her, as I was.

“I’ll take you home,” I said. The loose sole on the end of my foot was flopping stupidly. I was ridiculous, dumb as a post, I thought. Lucy was just now figuring it out.

“Okay,” she said.

We both turned north. Outside our neighbors’ houses the sprinklers were casting nets of water on the lawns. Dogs barked at us. Small children stopped to stare. Buck was irritable, kicking his legs up a little every now and then to test my seat, his ears

laying back. He'd get it in his head to turn around toward home, and then I'd jerk the reins to keep him on course.

In the distance came a faint honk. Over my shoulder I saw a logging truck about a mile away coming toward us. They came so fast down these country roads that it made the windows on our house rattle. They bore down recklessly from the mountains, and killed our cats and dogs. I pulled Buck back to walk behind Beautiful on the other side of the road.

"Watch out," I said to Lucy. "Truck."

She glanced over her shoulder. She smiled. Then she stuck out her arm, an action I didn't have time to interpret, her hand in a fist with her thumb sticking out, like a hitchhiker. The truck approached us slowly, and just when it reached us, where it would pass with plenty of room, Lucy pumped her arm up and down, signaling the driver to honk his horn.

The blare of the horn was the loudest sound of my life, mixed in with Lucy's startled cry and the screams of the horses. The sky tilted dangerously. Buck reared, spun away from the retreating truck, and bolted for home. Behind him Beautiful ran like a racehorse. She was soon running side by side with us. Lucy's hair was tossing around and I saw the whites of her wide blue eyes. Her glasses were long gone. So was the sole of my left boot, shaken clean off as the horses galloped full speed toward our farm. I pulled back on the reins. Buck strained forward. Beside me, Beautiful laid back her ears and ran so hard that foam started to fly from her mouth. The asphalt blurred under us. The saddlebag shifted and the watermelon flew out. I watched it crack against the road and burst. I wanted to reach out to steady Lucy, to keep her on her horse, but I couldn't

pull my fingers from their grip on the saddle. In this way we flew along Coltman Road. The horses seemed to reach out to grab the earth and pull it under us. We came to my farm and Buck banked into a turn and then leaped over the fence, me clinging to his back for dear life. Then, just like that, he stopped. I sat absolutely still for a moment, letting my fingers unclench, letting my brain register that I was still alive.

Beautiful had stopped short of the fence. Lucy was sitting sagged on her back with her head down. Both horse and girl were panting.

I slid off Buck's back. The blood rushed from my pounding heart to my head, and I staggered toward her, the bottom of my bare foot sticking in the mud and manure of the pasture.

"Why'd you do that?" I asked.

She closed her eyes. Her jaw tightened. Her hand came down to touch Beautiful's neck. The horse started a bit, as if it had forgotten Lucy was there. Lucy's lip began to quiver.

"Why'd you do that?" I asked again. My sisters' faces appeared in the window, their eyes wide, and I knew I must be shouting at her.

"I don't know," she murmured.

"You could have gotten killed. Do you know that? You're lucky you didn't fall off and break your head on the concrete. Good grief," I said, turning my back on her, stalking toward the house, my head filled with the aftershocks of fear and rage. I saw my mother on the front step, but I didn't look at her face. I pushed past her into the house, where I glared at Lee until he retreated, leaving our bedroom empty. I threw myself

down on the bed, where I could still feel the horses running, barreling away from Ellis Lane.

Someone knocked on the door.

“Go away,” I said.

The door opened. It was my dad, and he looked angry, and I didn’t care.

“Go away.”

He rushed me and grabbed me by the ear. Then he dragged me through the house, back into the yard, where Lucy was still sitting on Beautiful. Right in front of her he pushed me so hard I fell in the dirt.

“Henry,” said Lucy, this time with pity in her voice. My anger at her swelled so I thought my head would burst with it. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“You go find the girl’s glasses,” said my dad. “You find them and get her home and then you get back here and take care of the horse.”

I moved toward Beautiful and took the reins from where they lay loose on the ground. I tugged the horse’s head up, turned, and started to lead her down the driveway. My whole family watched, except my dad who disappeared into the house with a bang of the screen door. Walking the asphalt burned the bottom of my foot but I didn’t care. I walked toward Lucy’s house at as quick a pace as I could bear. Behind me, Beautiful relaxed, breathing her sweet hay-smell into my face, occasionally trotting to keep up. I pushed her nose away. I led us carefully around the smashed watermelon. I didn’t look at Lucy. I was too ashamed. Somehow the whole afternoon had been turned on its head. I had said that we were lucky not to have been killed, but it didn’t feel like luck. I would have gladly jumped into a dark pit, never to be seen again.

Lucy's glasses were laying just at the point where the horses had spooked. One of the lenses was cracked. I took Lucy's hand, without tenderness, and put the glasses in it. She fumbled them up to her face. She looked at me and started to cry. She sniffled loudly all the way down the rest of the street, until I turned into her driveway. Then I handed her the reins. She took them, her other hand wiping at her face.

"Henry," she said. Behind her, her parents were coming out the front door, already making noises of sympathy, reaching out their arms for her. My mom must have called them.

"I know," I said. Then I turned away quick and started to jog back toward the farm, limping on my exposed foot.

In bed that night I stared up at the ceiling and felt myself, all those hours later, finally growing calm. I would apologize to Lucy, I thought. I might even joke about it. I would make her laugh to forgive me. Every day for the rest of the week I planned my apology. I would bring her flowers, I thought, yellow daisies from the side of our house, and give them to her on the bus.

On the first morning of school, as we all sat around the breakfast table, my dad announced that he would be selling our horses.

We stared at him. Even my mother, cooking scrambled eggs at the stove, turned to look into his face. He was sober and serious. It was not just a threat.

"Oh, Henry," she said, and it wasn't clear if she was talking about him or me.

"They're a plain nuisance," he said. "We don't ride anymore. The kids don't look after them the way they should. I know some rich guy just outside the city who will

pay good money for those horses. Then we can fix some things up around here. Get the kids some new shoes.”

Everyone looked at me again. I felt my face getting hot.

“Hank rides them,” said one of my sisters.

My dad snorted. “Hank doesn’t know how to handle them.”

“I do know how to handle them,” I said, so low I didn’t know if he’d hear.

“You know how to make eyes at little girls,” said my father. He took the last bite of his toast, then pushed his plate away from him.

“Well, at least I can make her smile,” I said. When he looked up, I looked him in the eye. “All you ever do is make your woman cry.”

The room went quiet. I held my father’s gaze. His face reddened. His hand tugged the collar of his shirt, unbuttoned the top button.

The noise of my father’s chair sliding back startled us all. My sisters screamed as my dad lunged at me across the table. He swung his long, powerful arm. The blow caught me on the cheek just in front of the ear. I spun out of my chair, crashed against the wall so hard I heard a cracking sound. Somehow the table tipped over. Dishes broke on the floor. My father ran at me, kicking at me with his boot. Pain exploded in my ribs. I put my hands up to shield my head.

“Stop!” said my mother. She held the frying pan in her hand, scrambled eggs strewn over the floor. Behind her, my sisters sobbed weakly. My father paused, as if he had been frozen by the word.

“Henry. This is your son,” she said.

My father turned without a word and pushed out the kitchen door into the yard.

“This is your father,” my mother said to me, softly.

I lay where I had fallen, the breath coming out of me ragged. Outside the school bus came to a stop in front of our house. It honked. Suddenly my sisters ran for the door, Lee right behind them. Mama put the frying pan on the stove. She crossed the kitchen and held her hand out to me, then pulled me to my feet.

“Are you hurt?” She brushed egg from the front of my shirt.

I was hurt. The left side of my head felt swollen, probably already turning black and blue. My ribs ached, but not so bad as my heart.

“No, ma’am,” I said.

“Then go to school.”

Lucy wasn’t on the bus when I staggered up the steps. The bus driver looked at me out of the corner of her eye. I slumped into a seat. Then the bus moved slowly down Coltman Road, away from my father and the farm.

By recess I was feeling better. I was telling everyone I had been kicked by a horse. Lucky, that’s what I said I was, touching the bruised place on my cheek. My stomach was tight with the thought of seeing Lucy, who would know, as she always did, that it wasn’t a horse that kicked me. I hadn’t seen Lucy for a whole week. I looked for her in the lunchroom. I stood at the door of the cafeteria and scanned the lunch tables, looking for the flash of her glasses. And then I saw this girl that looked a little like Lucy Boone, sitting at a table with a bunch of other girls sitting around her. She wore a new pink sweater, her golden hair loose on her shoulders. She held her head high. She smiled at the other girls as they chattered at her. And she was not wearing her glasses.

She looked in my direction, saw me, and then looked away, twirling a piece of hair around her finger like I was no more to her than another boy in the lunchroom.

I was feeling brave. I strode across the cafeteria, keeping my eyes on her face, her cheeks that were already starting to flush.

“Hey,” I said to her. “Where’s your glasses?”

The other girls stopped talking to stare at me like I was a stray cat that had wandered up.

“She got contacts,” said one of them. I waited for Lucy to say something herself, but she just sat there listening to the way the news sounded coming from someone else.

“Can I talk to you?” I asked, feeling the eyes of all these girls on me like pinpricks.

“Talk,” she said, and the girls twittered with laughter.

“In private,” I said.

“I’m kind of busy here,” she said. In her face there was something of the same expression she’d worn when she had wanted me to look at her without her glasses and tell her what I saw.

“I’m sorry about last week,” I said.

“It’s no big deal.”

“Yeah, but I’m sorry. I was a jerk. I shouldn’t have yelled.”

She looked away. “It’s okay, Henry.”

“I was trying to ask you to the ward dance this Saturday.”

Her eyes grew warmer, the hint of a smile playing her lips. The other girls had fallen silent. Now, I thought, was time to be brave one more time.

“So,” I said, “will you go?”

Her smile faded. “What?”

“Will you go with me, to the ward dance?”

“Oh Henry,” she said, folding her little white hands into her lap.

“Is it because of what happened? I said I was sorry. I can talk to your parents. . .”

“No,” she said. “It’s because someone else asked me.”

The other girls were all staring at me, waiting to see what I would do. Lucy’s gaze flickered over to the bruise on my face, and I turned my head away. In a flash, what I felt for this girl went from what I thought of as love to what I thought of as hate. I felt like I had turned to stone.

“But you’re my girlfriend,” I said, although I already knew she wasn’t. She would not have said yes to someone else if she thought she belonged with me. Lucy put a hand out toward me, and I moved away from her.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s just that. . .”

“Now you have contacts,” I said.

“Henry,” she said.

“Don’t say you’re sorry,” I said.

“But Henry—”

“I’ll be seeing you around,” I said, and then I walked away from Lucy Boone.

When I got home my dad was loading the last of our horses into the rich man’s trailer. I stood in the pasture and watched him lead Buck up the ramp. He swung the door closed hard and latched it. Inside the trailer, Buck moved his legs nervously. He

was not used to that kind of travel. His eyes searched out mine through the holes in the side of the trailer. I felt a tightness in my chest, like my heart was being squeezed.

“A good riding horse, this one,” my dad was saying. The rich man was a cowboy wannabe, a guy that, had I been in a better mood, I would have made fun of to my brothers and sisters around the dinner table. He wore cowboy boots and a Stetson, a plaid shirt of the right cut, a large belt buckle with the word *Rich* on it. It was then that I realized that it wasn't some rich guy my father had mentioned, but the man's name.

“I'm thinking of giving this one to my daughter,” said the man. “She needs a gentle one.”

“Oh Buck ain't gentle,” I said, startling them both. “He bites. Take a big old chunk of flesh, you get close enough. And he spooks easy. I wouldn't put your daughter on that horse.”

The man turned to my dad, who looked at me and smiled a tight, angry smile.

“Oh now,” my dad said. “He's a steady fellow. Just spooked that one time when a logging truck blew its horn right next to him.” And then he was telling the story of me and Buck's wild ride, making it sound like it amused him. He left out all mention of Lucy. It was me, he said, that motioned for the truck to blow his horn.

“As long as your daughter's not stupid, she'll do all right on this old guy,” he said. The rich man flushed, said his daughter was no fool. All the same, he might try her on one of the other horses.

“Bye Buck,” I said, playing like I didn't care as the truck and trailer pulled out of our driveway, stirring up a cloud of dust. “See you at the glue factory.”

My dad stepped toward me.

“Come here,” he said, holding out his arms like he was going to hug me.

“No sir,” I said, taking a few steps back, wiping at my eyes. “I had enough for today.”

“Do you want me to say I’m sorry?” he said, his voice cutting at me. “Is that what you want?”

“Sorry don’t cut it,” I said. Then I ran down our driveway and kept running down our street towards Ellis Lane. I was winded when I reached the bridge. Something glinted in the weeds. It was my pocketknife. It must have fallen out of the saddlebag before the horses even got to the road. I crossed the bridge with the knife in the palm of my hand, and sat on the fallen tree and let myself stew in Lucy, my love for her, my hate, my shame. I ran my hand over the place in the trunk where I had carved our initials.

H.R. heart L.B.

The hate didn’t go away. I came to realize, in the hours of that fateful afternoon, that Lucy had only liked me because I had liked her when no one else had. Now that she could show those pretty blue eyes, now that she could see so clearly, I was nothing. I was nothing, I thought, to nobody. I said, out loud, “Goodbye, Lucy Boone, you bitch.” Never before had a swear word crossed my lips. My dad would have washed my mouth out with soap if he heard. My mom would have been ashamed.

“Bitch,” I said as I scraped at the letters on the trunk of the tree. It was so easy to scratch us out.

I got home just before dark. On my bed I found a shoebox with new shoes inside. I put them on. They were white basketball sneakers, good for anything. They were a size

too big, built for me to grow into. I disliked them instantly. I took my new shoes out in the pasture to dirty up a bit. Without the horses, the pasture felt like a graveyard, dusty and empty, full of shadows and echoes.

I heard a rattle and jumped back. It was a sound I knew well. I had learned to know a snake's rattle as something different from the noises grasshoppers make to scare you off. If the horses had been there, they would have trampled it under their feet. I had seen them do it. One time my dad had found one on a big rock in the back of the pasture, lethargic with cold. He'd grabbed it behind the head and cut its head off with his hunting knife. We'd eaten it for dinner. My mother had fried it like chicken. It was stringy and a little chewy. My sisters complained, but ate their share without leaving any over. It really did, we all agreed, taste like chicken. It was something we could eat again.

I tried to make my eyes adjust to the growing darkness. Then I could see the snake, coiled against the back fence like a spring. This was no cold snake. It was a little mad rattler, not much more than a baby. It couldn't be more than two or three feet long.

I knew that I should get the hoe out of the shed and chop its head off. Or get my father to do the job. I couldn't just leave a snake in the back of the pasture where we could find it on the front porch in the morning, waiting to bite my mom or my sisters.

Then the idea came to me. I'm not sure where it came from. I lost my mind, I would later tell my mother, my eyes full of tears. She never spoke about it. None of us did. What I remember was that I didn't give the situation a whole lot of thought. The anger was still boiling in me, the swear word still on my tongue. The horses were gone. My life was an empty pasture that would soon be sold to the highest bidder.

I retrieved the shoebox from the house. I wrote Lucy's name on the top with a black marker my mom used for writing dates on packages of meat. It would be time for dinner soon. My mom and sisters were moving around the kitchen getting ready. The sun had sunk completely behind the mountains, and the sky was starting to turn that beautiful blue that comes just before night. In the pasture, with the shoebox open, I wrangled the snake with a plastic rake. It struck at me, but missed. I pinned it to the ground just behind the head, as I'd seen my dad do. Then I scraped it into the shoebox and put a rock on the lid. It was such a little snake, even smaller than I had originally thought. It fit into the shoebox without a problem. For a moment I stared at it, this shoebox in the middle of our pasture. And I cried. The tears slipped down my cheeks into the dust. The air was full of the smell of horse manure and drying alfalfa. The wind was blowing in grit from the Arco desert, drying my tears into streaks of dirt on my face.

I picked up the box, which rattled at me. I held it between my hands, careful to hold down the lid. The box was silent as I walked the mile to Lucy's house. It didn't make a noise when I climbed the steps to her porch. Inside her house, there was classical music playing. I looked through the window. There was Lucy without her glasses and her family having dinner around the table. The smell of cooking meat hung in the air. They were eating steak, mashed potatoes, and some kind of green vegetable. They were talking. Lucy was probably telling them about her day at school, about being asked to the ward dance by some guy who'd never looked at her twice before today, about what being beautiful felt like now.

I turned away from the window and put the shoebox in front of the front door.

Then I took the little red Ferrari out of my pocket, where it had been a thing of solace for five years of my life.

“Goodbye,” I said to the car, to Lucy one last time, and I set the car on top of the box, which rattled faintly, and I took off again toward home. That night my family would sit around the table and eat fried chicken as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. We enjoyed the momentary prosperity that the sale of the horses brought to us. My mother even made an apple pie. I laid in bed that night waiting, as I felt I had been waiting most of my life, for something to happen that would take me to a different place.

Years later, Lucy would write me a letter. I forgive you, it said. I wish I could say that I married Lucy Boone, that she would speak of me fondly as a love that jumped out and bit her. But we both had the poison in us already. I don't want this story to be about my father, or the ways that I became like him. But I keep Lucy's letter tucked in the bottom of my sock drawer. Every now and then it catches my eye, and I take it out. Then I read it to remind me of how ugly the heart can get.

### SILVERTIP

The truth was, all the Yellowstone animals had been riled up since the fire. Even most of a year later, the smell of burnt pine still hung in the air. The animals could taste it. The tourists, keen to see the long blackened strips the fire had left on the hillsides, came in bigger droves than usual. It was a bad combination. By June of that season there had been more trouble between animals and tourists all the way around. Bison charged at parked cars with no warning. In May a moose with a young calf had trampled an old man to death while a woman with a video camera stood recording. The scene played again and again on the local news channels, so often that the image of this white-haired man reaching up in his last moments to beat his fists at the moose was etched behind my eyelids for weeks. The call of the camp-robber jays, as they swooped from one picnic table to another, seemed sharper. Even the elk seemed to move with a fierce, agitated swiftness, as if they were always preparing to run.

The fire had killed some three hundred elk, thirty-six deer, twelve moose, six black bears, nine bison, and two men. Two grizzlies that the forest service had radio-collared disappeared, and were presumed to have been caught in the blaze. After the fire was over, the entire West brimmed with stories. Smokey the Bear was renewed as the park's mascot, the little black bear cub the rangers found up a tree, his paws badly

burned, bawling for his mama. Now he wore a ranger hat and said, “Only you can prevent forest fires,” to children watching Saturday morning cartoons. I best liked the story one ranger told of seeing a dead pheasant with its wings stretched against the ground. When the ranger took a step toward it, a breath of wind stirred and crumbled the pheasant into ashes, and four live yellow chicks tumbled out.

I was easy to please with stories like that. I had just turned eighteen and the idea of working for the forest service had come to me in a dream, and in the dream I had seen myself as something between an Indian Scout and a nurse.

My family had come to see the fire while it was burning, packed all eight children into the Suburban and driven the three hours from Eagle City to witness what my parents called history in the making. We had watched the firemen frantically hose down the roof of the Old Faithful Lodge. My mother took a picture as the fire crested the ridge, before we were ordered to evacuate. I remember it as a pillar of fire, the way God watched over the Israelites when they left Egypt. That evening, as my father put up our tents in a campground at the other, safer side of the park, I watched a blood-red sun descend into the mountains, so big I could have put out my hand and picked it like a peach.

“The smoke turns it that color,” my mother said. “God gives us beauty, even in destruction.”

My last day in Yellowstone began on an early June morning, as my roommate Becky and I worked to clear thistle from a trail near the northwestern-most point of Lake Yellowstone. About an hour into our shift, a ranger approached us. His name was Edward Wood, a fifty-something, graying gentleman I had worked with several times.

He had a ponytail, something I was unaccustomed to seeing on a man, and a way of standing perfectly still that made me wonder if there wasn't some Blackfoot or Shoshone blood in him. He said he wanted to talk to us.

"I just need to know," he said, "if for either of you girls it's your time of the month."

"Not me," Becky said. Before breakfast, just outside Grayling Lodge, I'd seen Becky kiss Ranger Wood. I'd seen him tell her plain that she was too young for him. Now she was turning her face away from him, hands shoved in her pockets, trying to appear just as grown up and casual as could be. "I'm clear," she said and walked off.

Ranger Wood fixed his solemn brown gaze on me. I don't think I've ever blushed so deep in all my life.

"No," I murmured.

"The bears can smell it," he said, rubbing the back of his neck in an embarrassed manner. "They've been known to attack that way, is all."

So often since that day I've wondered what would have happened if I had said something else to Ranger Wood that morning. I wonder if I might have said something to him if I hadn't witnessed his lover's quarrel with Becky. Really it doesn't matter. It doesn't do to look back and ask what might have been, I keep saying. Sometimes a person is set for change, and nothing in this world can stop it. Forests burn. Animals attack. I, of course, did not dream I was in any kind of danger that morning. I was embarrassed, was all, for Ranger Wood and for me. And so I said nothing else, not a lie but not the truth either, and Ranger Wood walked on down the trail.

Two days earlier a fly fisherman had been killed by a grizzly just south of West Thumb. Afterwards, the bear even went back for the man's string of cutthroat trout. The employees joked about it some. He'd been fishing without a park license, might have got what he deserved, they said. Some employees got it into their heads that the thing to do, after all this stern talk of bears and death, was to celebrate life, which to them meant skinny dipping in the hot springs.

"They catch you, you're out of here," I said to Mark when he asked me to come along.

"It'll be fun," he said. We were biking a path near Grayling Lodge, both of us sweating a little, racing back to my cabin in the late afternoon. I liked Mark more than anyone in the park. At the time I was thinking over whether I actually loved him, whether I should just throw myself into his arms and tell him so flat out, from the tip of his sunburned nose to the soles of his raggedy Birkenstocks. He ran the boat tour on Lake Yellowstone. The sun had burned him a crisp toast color that made his blue eyes glow bright in his head. He looked to me like a bronze statue, something that was shaped to look upon in wonder. He was twenty-one, from the Oregon Coast, which sounded to me like some exotic place, with crashing waves and clam chowder. He wasn't stuck up the way some people get when they come to Yellowstone to work, like they have a backstage pass to nature. Mark enjoyed his job. He liked the glimmers on the water, the wind whipping him, the sight of the tourists' faces as they looked up at the mountains. He appreciated the land, and he liked people. When he got close enough I could smell the lake on him, and it made my ears get hot and an unfamiliar heaviness move into my stomach.

“You’d be willing to risk it? Getting fired, getting thrown out of here, all for some beer and some hot water?”

Mark smiled. His teeth, against his tan, were unbelievably white. “I’m not afraid,” he said. “Life’s about risk, isn’t it?”

“The earth here’s always shifting you know. Something could change, heat up the water, and we’d all get boiled alive.” We skidded up to my cabin together and dismounted from our bikes. I brushed dust from my shorts.

Mark tugged at the collar of his tee-shirt as if it already bothered him to be wearing clothes.

“We could stay here,” I said. “I have cards. We could play poker.”

“What kind of poker?” he said. I unlocked my cabin door but did not open it.

“You’re lucky my dad isn’t here, or you’d get a whipping for being fresh.”

Mark kissed me, just grabbed my hand and drew me straight to him and brushed his lips across mine. It was a dry, gentlemanly kind of kiss, but it filled me with weakness.

“I saw that river otter today,” he said when he pulled back. “Over by West Thumb.”

“Is that so?”

“He told me to tell you to come to the hot springs tomorrow night.”

“Ranger Wood will catch us,” I murmured. “We’ll lose our jobs.”

“We won’t,” said Mark, pressing his forehead to mine and boring those blue eyes into me.

“How do you know?”

“The otter told me.”

Some things you just can't argue out. I sighed, leaned against my cabin door and looked at this boy, my first official boyfriend, a boy I thought in some distant life I might marry and have little babies with. He looked bored with me, his brows pulling together in genuine disappointment.

“Mark Cooper,” I said. “You're a bad influence, you know that?”

“Come on,” he said. “Live a little.”

After Ranger Wood came to ask if we were safe to be in the forest, Becky said she had to pee. She hadn't been herself all day. She'd been silent as we found a place for lunch, chewed her sandwich in slow, methodical bites. I could hear her grumbling to herself as she cleared the trail.

“I'm going to the lodge,” she said after a while. “I have to pee. Be back in a minute.”

We're supposed to go in pairs, even to the bathroom, but Becky moved off quickly down the trail, taking big determined strides, talking to herself. She wanted to be left alone. It was getting hot. A trickle of sweat made its way down the side of my neck, and I wiped at it. I was thirsty. The dust of the trail swirled up behind Becky, making everything, just for a moment, a bit hazy. I found my backpack where I'd left it in the brush and pulled out my water bottle. Down the trail a little ways there was a spot that overlooked the lake, and I jogged down to it. It was strangely quiet. No birds. No tourists chattering. There weren't even boats on the water.

I pictured Mark's boat. I imagined the wind whipping his face, stirring up his hair as his boat skimmed across the water. I thought about the shape of his hands, the square nails, the calluses along the ridge of each palm. The way that roughness felt against the skin on the back of my arm. I don't know how long I stood there, drinking my water, thinking of him. Suddenly the wind picked up. There was the noise of someone moving up the path, the crack of a branch. I detected a strange smell, a mixture of something like wet dog drying in the sun, a little fish-like. I turned.

The bear had just come onto the trail. He was a giant grizzly, what we in Idaho call silvertips on account of the color of their fur. The sun glazed his shoulders with a silver-gold color. I remember his shoulders in those first moments, the massive glowing shoulders rearing up at me with the grace of a man in a big fur coat. If there was ever a moment when I felt the weight of what it means to be alive, every nerve firing, the breath freezing in my lungs, my eyes sending the picture of this beast to the part of my brain that would soon take over, it was this moment. Then the bear's brown eyes looked right into mine, and he charged.

I had always been a good girl, and from the first moment that I became conscious of that fact, I was made to feel ashamed of it. I was the fifth of eight children, and less trouble than my two older brothers and two older sisters combined. I never had to be told to sit up straight, to chew with my mouth closed, to do my homework. When my parents spoke of me it was with a gleam in their eyes, like after all their trying they'd finally got one right.

My brothers and sisters, of course, saw it differently. They saw that I had to be taken down some. “Don’t be a goody two shoes,” they seemed to chant from every corner of the house. As I got older this changed to, “Come on, live a little.” As a child it wasn’t long before things just started to happen to tarnish me in my parents’ eyes. Candy would be stolen from the pantry and the wrappers discovered on my nightstand. Sweaters would be borrowed from my mother’s closet and found hanging in mine. Whenever my parents confronted me about something like this, it made me sick with the strange fear that I would become what they were accusing me of. My mouth always went dry, and I could not help licking my lips. My parents saw this as a clear sign that I was lying.

“You’re a terrible liar, Colleen,” my mother often said. “You should give it up.”

I tried to imagine that I would be involved in a terrible accident and killed, and then my siblings would be consumed with guilt and tearfully confess to my parents to all the misdeeds that they had pinned on me. I only hoped that my mother was right about death, that we move into the world of spirits, which is only separated by a thin veil from our own world, and I would be able to witness it all, every tear, every quivering apology. Yet part of me could not believe it, part of me always saw death as a black nothing, a crumbling away like the ashes of the pheasant who died protecting her young.

After the bear let me go, I rolled. I forced my body over the embankment and rolled, knocking my way down the hill until I hit the lake. Then I swam. The smell of the bear was still on me, his saliva gleaming along the top of my arm. I still felt the strength of his arms enclosing me. It was an embrace that would never fully leave my consciousness, even in the arms of my husband, years later, who traced the silver lines of

my scars with a tenderness that brought me to tears. “It must have been terrible for you,” he said. “You must have been so scared.”

I do not remember fear. I remember the lake, the blood spooling out behind me as I swam hard for the opposite shore. The bear did not come after me. I drew up onto my back and floated, kicked out across the lake that felt as big as the sea. I saw the bear for a moment at the top of the rise, standing up on his back legs, then dropping and turning away. The water beneath me was a deep green, cool and deep and never-ending. I floated and swam for what seemed like hours, until I felt smooth stones beneath my feet. On the bank, I tried to tear my shirt into a bandage to bind my arm. I was too weak. I laid my head down and cried for my mother. The sun dropped behind the trees. The other side of the lake, where they would be looking for me, looked miles away.

“They brought me teddy bears,” I would tell my husband, rolling on my side in our bed to look at him and try to smile. “At the hospital. They practically lined the walls with teddy bears.”

“That’s not funny,” he said.

But I smiled, maybe even laughed a little, and I said, “Yes, it is.”

The night before I was attacked by the big grizzly, a group of park employees, Mark, Becky, me, and Dale, a boy I had never met from the Grant Village General Store went skinny dipping in a hot spring. It was close to midnight when we moved carefully through the pines away from Grayling Lodge. The moon was full that night, hanging big and low in the deep blue sky. Mark held my hand as we walked the trail; then we tucked into a car and drove up toward a place Dale knew in the woods, a secluded hot spring

where the water wasn't too hot. Walking in these woods at night, you get the idea that you are in the deep part of the earth, a place enclosed on every side with black whispering pines, walking in a secret. Then we reached a burned section, where the brush had all been burned away, leaving the bare, blackened trunks of pine trees that still bore needles on top. The ground crunched under our feet. I could hardly catch my breath. The air smelled overwhelmingly of smoke.

We found the spring on the edge of a little clearing, between a burned and a live part of the forest. The four of us stood around the spring, looking into it doubtfully. It was about ten feet across, with shallow water, and clear enough to see the moon rippling on it. The bottom looked clean enough, not muddy and only a bit of algae along the edges. It was impossible to tell what temperature it was.

"How do we know if it's cool enough?" asked Becky.

"I'm willing to sacrifice a toe to find out," said Dale, taking off his shoes. He carefully stretched his foot over the water. The smell of sulfur and smoke was making me feel light-headed. My heart drummed in my ears. I looked at Mark. He was looking composed as ever, one hand casually grasping mine, the other stuffed in his pocket. But I could see a fierce heartbeat going in his neck. Dale slowly lowered his foot, the way a tight-rope walker might set his feet on the line, until his big toe breached the surface of the water. Then he dipped in his whole foot.

"Perfect," he said. "What did I tell you?"

There were cans of beer suddenly, and clothing being tossed off like it was no big deal. Mark let go of my hand. I stared at him as he pulled his tee-shirt over his head,

where it caught at his shoulders. Under the shirt his skin was white as mountain snow, in sharp contrast to the brown of his arms. He grinned at me.

“Now you,” he said, lifting his eyebrows at me.

My arms felt too heavy to lift. I stared at him.

“Do you want me to help you?” he said.

“No,” I murmured quickly. “I can do it.” I worked at the buttons of my green forest service shirt, slowly, button by button, until there were no buttons left and then I clung to the edges for a moment before peeling the shirt back.

“Cute bra,” said Becky. She had already shed her shirt and shorts, and was standing next to the spring in her underwear, shivering. “Do we have to get completely naked?”

“Yes,” said Dale. He was already in the spring, leaning his head back against the rock edge, his clothes in a heap a few feet away. “That was the agreement.”

“I’ll be naked in the water,” she said. “But you all turn around while I get in.”

Dale put his hands over his eyes and the rest of us turned away. There was a splash and a giggle and then Becky told us we could look again. The clearness of the water did little to hide her body, and I felt a flash of realization that my own body was not nearly so womanly; I had smaller breasts, straighter hips. I would look like a child next to her.

Mark turned his back to me and stepped out of his shorts. He held his hands in front of himself as he lowered into the spring.

“It’s good,” he said. “It’s just right.”

I felt tears rising in my eyes. He was so graceful, unlike any boy I had ever met. With just the right amount of modesty, I thought. No one would call him a goody two shoes. No one would question his courage. In a quick movement I bent and stepped out of my shorts, then reached behind to undo my bra. I wrapped an arm around me, emulating Mark, and stepped out of my underwear trying to shield myself with my other hand. Mark was looking up at the moon. I slid in beside him. The heat of the spring was a shock on top of the heat of my embarrassment. Mark's shoulder pressed against mine. He leaned his head toward me suddenly, until his mouth nearly touched my ear.

"You're beautiful," he said. "Like a swan on the lake."

My whole body zinged with happiness. I tried to look skeptical. "That was about the cheesiest thing I ever heard," I whispered back to him.

Dale handed me a beer, which I drank quickly. With Mark beside me, acting no differently than he did when we were riding bikes together or sitting on the lakeshore fully clothed, the warm water loosening my tight arms, I let myself wander off into a dream. It was unlike I'd imagined it would be. This was no loud, naked party. Occasionally Becky would break the silence with a false laugh at one of the other boy's jokes. But for the most part the group was calm, talking quietly, looking at the moon and the shapes of trees around us. Off in the distance I thought I heard the hoot of an owl.

"You want to know the worst one?" Becky said then, loudly.

"The worst what?"

"The worst death, stupid," said Becky. "Ed told me."

"Who's Ed?" asked Dale.

"Oh you know," said Becky casually. "Ranger Wood."

“You call Ranger Wood, Ed?” said Dale, smirking.

Becky blushed. “He told me to,” she said quickly. “He’s really friendly, you know.”

“Sounds like it,” said Dale.

“Tell the story,” said Mark. I dared to snuggle closer to him, to lay my head on his shoulder. His hand floated down on the outside of my leg, near my knee, stroking lightly.

“There were these two guys from Wyoming.”

“That sounds bad already,” said Dale.

“And a dog. They brought their dog to the park. They both got out of the car, and before they could stop it, the dog jumped out too. It thought they were going to a lake or something. It was a Labrador, the dumb kind, you know. Anyway, it took off running and just leapt on in the first pool it saw.”

“Which one?” said Mark.

“What?” said Becky, disoriented.

“Which pool did it jump in?”

“Oh. I don’t know. A pretty big one, though, and really hot, like two hundred degrees or something. The dog just jumped right in, and it started yelping right away.”

Mark took my hand and squeezed it. “That is pretty bad,” he said.

“That’s not the bad part,” said Becky, her brown eyes wide and serious. “One of the guys went in after it.”

“No way,” said Dale, snorting. “You’re joshing us.”

“I’m not. He went up to the side of the pool and starting taking off his shoes. There were a bunch of people standing around. Some even took pictures. And they told him, don’t do it, man. The water’s too hot. It’ll cook you too. It’s too late for the dog. But he didn’t listen. He jumped in after it.”

She paused for effect. I tried to listen for the owl. The night seemed to have become perfectly still. I tried not to think about the yelping of the dog.

“So what happened?” asked Dale. Becky pushed a strand of wet hair away from her face.

“He swam out to the dog, in the middle of the pool. Everyone could see he was in pain, but he didn’t make a sound. He grabbed the dog’s collar, and started swimming back. About halfway back, he just seemed to give out. They both went under, and came back up. The guy gave up on the dog, let him go, and just started swimming to get himself out. When he got close enough to the edge, they grabbed him and pulled him out.”

“Did he live?” Dale seemed to be absorbed in the story. He had put his arm around Becky’s shoulders and was holding onto her like she meant something precious to him.

“No,” said Becky mournfully. “He had burned every part of his body. They ended up shipping him off to the burn unit in Salt Lake, and he died there a couple weeks later. One of the tourists went to pick up his shoes, and he saw something that looked like a glove laying there on the boardwalk. Do you know what it was?”

“It was the skin of his hand,” said Mark suddenly, without looking at her.

Becky looked disappointed. “Yes,” she said. “The skin from his hand, boiled off.”

“That’s disgusting,” I said.

“What happened to the dog?” asked Dale.

“They left the dog,” said Becky. “In the pool. It was there for months, Ed— Ranger Wood said.”

We were all quiet for a long moment, thinking about that. We were all young enough that tragedy, vulnerability to something like hot water, seemed like a faraway thing.

“Poor dog,” I said. My family had a Labrador back home in Eagle City, a sweet little blond dog named Peaches my father had bought for duck hunting. Growing up, I had swum across Rigby Lake with Peaches swimming by my side, paws churning the water, looking over anxiously at me to make sure I didn’t go under.

“Poor guy from Wyoming,” said Dale. He opened another beer and took a deep swig from it.

“I bet it was the big blue pool,” said Mark. “The one that looks like it doesn’t have a bottom.”

Just then we all heard the sound of a breaking branch in the forest.

“What was that?” said Becky.

“Shh,” said Mark.

We all listened. Over our heads, the moon even strained to listen. The noise came again, the sound of something moving in the woods.

I squeezed Mark's arm. "The bear," I whispered. We were less than a mile from where the fisherman had been killed. The stupidity of it settled over me like poured concrete.

"It's getting closer," whimpered Becky. "Do something."

"Get a beer," said Mark. "We can throw it."

I began to see the shadow of the beast in the trees, a black shape against blackness, swaying. The moon was so bright that our frightened faces gleamed in the reflection of the water. Mark and Dale both heaved themselves out of the water and started to sort their clothes as quietly as they could. They each held an unopened beer in their hand, our only weapon against the dark.

There was a crash of branches. Becky put her hand over her mouth to stifle a scream. I felt myself sinking deeper into the spring, the sulfur-scented water right under my nose. My breath stirred the surface of the water in short blasts.

The dark shape reared out of the blackness. None of us moved. The boys stood with their arms slung behind them, frozen in the arc of their throws. Becky and I, still in the hot spring, gasped like a singular creature, breathing together in terror.

It was an elk. A male, probably six pointer. His antlers seemed to take up as much space as his body. His eyes glittered in the moon, rolling a little. There was a gash in his shoulder that ripped down almost to his knee, but he did not limp or stumble. The blood gleamed black. I could smell it, the earthy coppery life of him smearing the trees and along his flank. I could hear him breathing slow and steady, huffing into the silence.

We stared at him. He had taken time into him, frozen the world in the dark cocoon of the forest. He was the forest. He was the moon and clouds moving over it.

He was the night. Then he arched his neck, looking at us from the edge of the trees, looking at the water, and he bugled. The sound pierced me like a fish hook. My throat closed on the noise as it winnowed around us, then up, into the light, stirring the veil that divides this world and the next.

I had never seen stars so bright as that night they found me. The stars were like eyes watching me. I was starting to feel ribbons of pain then, all along my arm, up and over my shoulder and across my back. I imagined my parents searching for me, frantic, calling my name. I imagined Mark, the look in his eyes when they told him I was missing. Hurry, I wanted to say to them. Hurry and find me. I had no doubt that they would find me, if they looked hard enough. I was just waiting for their voices to float toward me in the dark. I was waiting to be rescued. I was hurt bad, but I was done thinking that I was going to die. I was suddenly thinking about that elk, the way he had moved through the shaggy darkness. As the water lapped the shore at my feet, I lay on the bank of Lake Yellowstone and tried to imitate the sound of his call.

We got back from the hot springs late, the time of night when even the crickets have gone quiet. Mark kissed me at the door to my cabin, a long, tighter kiss, not a gentleman this time. He tasted like beer and the charred forest.

“I want to come in,” he said.

“Becky’s here,” I said, smiling, simultaneously disappointed and relieved. Becky was coming up the trail. She swerved on the path and stopped to lean against a tree.

“And you’ve got two roomies. I guess we’ll just have to call it a night.”

He took my hand. "You're a good girl, Colleen."

"Don't say that." I stepped aside to let Becky pass into our cabin, where she fell heavily onto her bed.

"What should I say?"

"I'm not some goody two shoes, you know. I was naked as you tonight. I drank as much beer."

"You're right," he said. "I'm sorry, really. I didn't mean it that way. I just like you."

"I like you too."

"My roommates have got kitchen patrol at five a.m. Will you meet me, at my cabin, at six?"

That was only two hours away. Becky flipped onto her back and started to snore. I pulled the door closed and stood outside with Mark, and looked up into his eyes. I wanted to tell him that I would give it all to him, starting with my body, but my throat closed on the words.

"I'm not expecting anything," he said, after a moment. "We can just hang out, spend some time together, alone."

"Okay," I said.

He smiled. "Okay."

You aren't supposed to go back. I've gone back there a lot, in my mind, thought about every moment in Yellowstone, sized myself up through those memories. My husband never thought to ask why, in a forest full of people, a grizzly bear would choose

to attack me. I was just an eighteen year old girl standing at the edge of a lake. In the hospital the people filled my room with teddy bears and kissed the top of my head and said that I was the luckiest girl. They built a sense of security out of numbers: the number of hours they searched before they found me, the number of men who volunteered to hunt down the bear after it happened, the number of stitches that ran the length of my arm. The number of hours before they brought me a Polaroid close up of the bear's head, his eyes dead but gleaming, his nose flecked with blood and mud. They were so eager to show me, and when I turned my face away from the picture, when tears ran down my cheeks, they said, "She's just tired. She needs some rest." I knew I could never go back again. Except, of course, the almost daily journey of my mind to that lakeside, to Mark, to that morning, to the daily question it raises.

Nobody thinks to ask why it happened but me. And I think I know why. It was the smell of love on that girl, the way she looked at the water dreaming of a man's arms around her. She reeked of love, young love, a scent that attracts the beasts.

That morning as I jogged away from Mark's cabin, I found Becky and Ranger Wood yelling at each other outside of Grayling Lodge. I didn't have to listen long before I figured out that she had told him about the hot springs, and about Dale. To make him jealous maybe. Until that morning I did not know how much was between Becky and the ranger, but there was something immediate about the way she angled her body toward him, the way she turned her sharp pained face toward his.

"I should fire all four of you," he said, staring down at her with cold dark eyes.

"Good," she said. "Then I wouldn't have to look at your face."

She burst into tears. Ranger Ed stepped back as if she'd slapped him. He looked around. He did not see me where I had frozen in my steps around the corner of the lodge. Then he pulled her to his chest, stroked her hair in a fatherly way, murmured that he would give us all another chance if she would just compose herself.

Becky composed herself. She lifted her face from where she had tucked it against his neck and kissed him square on the mouth. Then she stood back and sobbed once, almost like a bark.

“Becky,” said Ranger Ed. “Becky, you know I don’t—“

“I love you, you know,” she said. “I loved you at first sight.”

“Oh, honey,” he said gently. “You’re too young to know what that is.”

That brings me to a part I do not tell my husband. The sun rising behind Mark’s cabin. He smelled of sleep when he opened the door, his hair pressed flat on one side. He wasn’t wearing a shirt, only low-riding shorts. I looked beyond him to his rumpled bed.

“You were right about me,” I said forlornly, because I was suddenly, again, so scared. “I am a good girl. I’m a virgin, you know.”

“You’re like a swan on the water,” he said. We smiled at each other. Mark stepped back to hold the door open for me, and I sidled into the earthy dark of the cabin. And this is the moment that I imagine the bear walking out of the burned part of the forest, leaving his prints on the sand along the shore of Lake Yellowstone. The rising sun blazes off the water in a silver fire. The bear drops his head to drink the cool glimmering water, and then he lifts his careful nose to smell the morning air.

### **ANDY'S STORY**

According to everyone's best guess, the bear was Old Pete. He was a fifteen-year-old grizzly who had been presumed dead when he disappeared during the 1989 Yellowstone fires. There was a famous picture of Old Pete in almost every restaurant in our town, standing on his hind legs in mid-stream, holding a salmon delicately between his paws. Old Pete was a famous face in Eagle City, Idaho. He was a celebrity. Then he became a fugitive.

Early in July that year a bear matching Pete's description attacked a group of Boy Scouts. None of the boys were hurt; the bear charged their campfire and they scattered, but the story got bigger and more dangerous every time they told it. It disturbed us all. It isn't in a wild thing's nature to charge a fire. Something was wrong. The park rangers tried to track it down, but they couldn't find a trace of it. That was when Old Pete started to become somewhat of a legend. A ghost from the animals killed in the fire, something made of smoke and bad dreams. In early August a grizzly killed a fisherman over by West Thumb, and that was when the bear became a reality for our town. Still the rangers could not find the bear. Then, three days after the fisherman's death, as my eighteen-year-old sister worked to clear a trail for the forest service along the shore of Lake Yellowstone, she disappeared. That is when Old Pete became real to me.

That night was chilly for August, as I remember. I walked slowly through the woods, casting the bare light of a flashlight at the trees and calling my sister's name into the dark. The woods were alive with her name. Members of the search party fanned out in the forest, layers of sweeping flashlights and shadows. They were rangers, friends, park employees, and all ten members of the Drucker family, down to our littlest brother. Somewhere behind me, my sister's partner from the forest service sobbed as she walked, drawing in deep choking breaths. She'd been saying the same thing for hours.

"I was only gone five minutes," she said.

As a Boy Scout I had hiked these woods, fished these lakes, squatted near the fire pits kindling fires. My brothers and sisters had all been volunteers to clear trails, plant trees, pick up litter from the sides of the road. We knew most of the rangers by name. Yellowstone Park was our playground. When it burned, we knew nothing else to do but to drive from Eagle City and watch the path the flames took, and wonder at the fragility and fierceness of the land.

"Colleen!" I cried into the trees. Ahead of me my parents walked hand in hand through the trees, calling out in frenzied rhythm. The search party reached the lake. We had already combed the shore. The common line of thinking was that Colleen might be up a tree somewhere, but to me it seemed unlikely that she would stay up a tree so many hours. She had gone missing sometime around one o'clock in the afternoon. It was now nearing three in the morning.

As the trees parted and I stepped down onto the round, smooth rocks of the lake shore, the sky opened up like a yawning monster. I'd never seen stars so bright. Colleen

loved stars; she had known the constellations since we were kids. She would point into the sky and say, “Cassiopeia, the sad queen. Orion, the hunter. He hunts the Great Bear across the sky.” She could have been looking at the same stars.

It had already occurred to most everyone that my sister’s disappearance could be more than the work of a bear. It could be a man. These things didn’t happen often in our part of the country, but they did happen. Like in every part of the world, there were creatures who hunted and hurt their own.

The search party stopped to rest. My mother started to pray. I think the stars made her think of God. She knelt down at the edge of the lake and lifted up her face, glossed with tears. My dad, standing behind her, wore an expression that was getting stonier by the minute. I could see him accepting my sister for dead. He had never been much of an optimist. In his mind, my sister had been gone for a little over sixteen hours and that just might be long enough to be gone for good.

“What now?” someone asked. No one had a good answer. The rangers gathered together, but it didn’t seem like they were forming any definite plan. Keep looking. Keep calling. It’d be easier going when it got light. We could spread out, someone suggested, although no one seemed to be comfortable with the idea of wandering when there was a ghost bear in the woods.

I was hot with anger. I leveled my frustration at the rangers, at their sheer incompetence that allowed this thing to happen. My dad and older brothers had brought down a black bear when I was five years old. They made it look like an easy thing. My dad had tracked the bear, shot it twice in the chest, and laid its body in the back of the truck to bring it home. I remembered them carrying its body slung between them into the

garage, and hanging it from the rafters to prepare to butcher it. Colleen had been seven years old then, and she liked to feel its fur. She ran her fingers all over its back, touched the whiskers on its snout, felt its stiff ears. My dad had it made into a rug and mounted it on the wall of his den with gold tacks.

I had never connected my fist to a man's body, never wanted to until now. Now there was no one to hit, nothing to do but keep walking. I picked a spot on the opposite shore of the lake. There was a pine tree near the edge of the water that pushed out a little further than the others, lit faintly with a silver hue in the moonlight. I'll go to that tree, I thought. While the others stood there and talked, I pushed off on my own.

The walk took more than two hours. I stopped calling because I figured it wouldn't do me any good. My voice was not going to bring my sister back. A few people from the search party followed me at a distance, stopping to call out questions to me that I ignored, sometimes moving off into the trees before they got scared and came back to the shore. I walked along the water's edge, picking my way through the rocks. The stars rotated over me. It would be morning soon. I became aware of the crunch of my feet on the rocks, the sound of lake hitting shore, the rustle of pines as a breeze lifted.

I found Colleen under the pine tree, staring at me with fierce, clear eyes. I dropped to my knees beside her. As I examined her with my flashlight I could see a strip of torn skin hanging like a piece of wet fabric from her right arm. The rocks under her were dark with blood. I smoothed a strand of hair back from her forehead. Her skin was moist. She smelled of blood and lake. She was shivering.

"It was a grizzly," she said.

I nodded. My skin felt too small to contain the surge of relief, so great and miraculous.

“It must have smelled me.”

“Lie still,” I told her, my voice gruff. I stood up, cleared my throat, and as loudly as my vocal cords could bear, I yelled, “She’s here!”

Then we watched the lights of the search party moving toward us through the trees that had grown black against the lightening sky.

The first teddy bear came on Colleen’s first day out of surgery. It was a large pink bear with a purple satin ribbon around its neck and a red heart stitched on its breast. It came in the arms of our Uncle Fred, who grinned ear to ear as he held it out to Colleen. I was sitting in a chair next to her bed when he brought it. I thought it was the worst joke I’d ever been witness to, and I said so. Uncle Fred had the sense to look embarrassed.

“No, it’s okay,” said Colleen, taking the bear with her left hand. Her right hand was blue and puffy, pushing out from under layers of gauze. Close to a thousand stitches, all in all. The first time they changed the bandages I saw how bad she was hurt, a cruel line of black stitches criss-crossing her arm, like Frankenstein’s monster, rising to circle her shoulder which was colored shades of purple and yellow. The bear had bitten her on the shoulder close to the neck, piercing deep into her muscle, a wet, raw wound that I could tell would be a long time healing. Her collarbone was broken. She wore a strap to hold her shoulders straight. The doctors said she was going to be fine, but looking at her so exposed under the nurse’s hands, her face clouded with pain and humiliation, I had some trouble believing them.

“How’d you know where to look for her?” asked Uncle Fred. That was the million-dollar question. I gave him the usual answer.

“I didn’t.”

“But your parents said you went straight to her, on the side of the lake where nobody had even thought to look.”

“Just lucky, I guess.”

Lucky. Like that night had just been a series of rolling dice.

Visitors came and went, our parents, Colleen’s friends, our neighbors and members of our church and girls she’d gone to school with and didn’t know too well. They all wanted to see the girl who’d been mauled by a grizzly. When they came to see Colleen they looked at me too, like I was a divine instrument, a finder of the lost. My mother claimed I was the answer to her prayer. But when it came down to deciding what I believed myself, I felt uneasy calling it anything but luck. I had seen a tree and decided to walk to it. I had been as surprised as anybody to find Colleen under that tree.

Colleen was gracious when people came, smiling every time they brought her a teddy bear. It became a way to break the tension. It made me hopping mad every time, but Colleen understood it better. People brought bears to let her know that things would be all right, that this was just an accident like a girl falling off her bike and scraping her knee. To Colleen it was love. To me it was just their selfish way of pretending that everything was fine when it wasn’t.

My sisters came by and offered to take a shift, give me a break. I refused.

“Really, I don’t need anyone,” Colleen said. “I’m fine here.”

“It’s no big deal,” I said. “It’s quieter here than in the house.”

I wanted to stay with her. My sister had been lost, and I had found her, and I wanted to see it through. I tried to really look at her. She had long and straight wheat-colored hair, good skin, a nice smile with dimples and even white teeth. If she had a fault it might be that her face was a bit too wide, her jaw cut boldly, not delicate enough for true beauty. And she was too good-natured, which vaguely bothered me. Even in the hospital bed, bare-faced, half her body wrapped in bandages, she gave out an aura of goodness. She could accept the bear's attack in a way that I couldn't.

Around dinnertime the visitors started to thin out. I flipped channels, looking for one Colleen wanted to settle on.

"Anything?" I asked after a while. She shook her head. I turned the TV off, and a blanket quiet settled on us. I felt her eyes on me. I wanted to ask her so many questions. What had it felt like in the arms of the bear? What did she see when she looked into his eyes? Could she feel his teeth scrape her bone? What was it like to be alive now? But these are questions that I have never asked her.

"I swam across the lake," she said in the voice of an older woman, resonant with the knowledge of pain and acceptance. I was reminded that she was older than I was. She was almost nineteen. If this hadn't happened she would have been off to community college in a few weeks. She would be meeting the man she would marry, and in a year or two I would have been standing in a suit at her wedding, posing for pictures.

"I was real lucky to find you," I answered, nodding. "We saw everyone we ever knew today," I said then to lighten the mood. "There won't be room for anything but stuffed animals in your bedroom when you get home."

"I like the bears," she said, but she didn't look at them. She sized me up instead.

“Do you have a girlfriend, Andy?”

I blushed to the roots of my hair. I pushed my chair back a few feet from the bed and looked at her like she was plumb crazy. “What kind of question is that?”

“I’m just wondering. You’re sixteen now, aren’t you?”

I stared at her.

“Sweet sixteen,” she said. “You must have had a few girlfriends by now.”

“No,” I mumbled. “I never have.”

Colleen laid back against the pillows with a strange sigh. “I had a boyfriend up there.”

“In Yellowstone?”

“He ran the boat tours on the lake.”

“Is he from town?”

“He’s from Oregon,” she said. “He’s goes to Oregon State.”

I felt like standing up. There was nothing to do with this information, so I just sat and chewed on it.

“Do Mom and Dad know?”

“No,” she said, suddenly fierce. “And you can’t tell them, Andy. Swear.”

“No,” I said. “I won’t tell them, but I won’t swear.”

She seemed satisfied with that.

“Just keep an eye out for him,” she said. “I expect he’ll visit.”

“Okay,” I said.

“His name is Mark,” she said.

The nurse appeared with Colleen's dinner. I went down to the cafeteria to find myself something to eat. In the hall I looked over every man I met, wondering about this Mark fellow, what he looked like, what he had to catch Colleen's eye. Most of all I wondered why he wasn't by my sister's side.

Mark did not appear that evening, or the next morning, or all of the next day. I got the sense that Colleen and I were waiting for him together, eager to see him, but for different reasons. Sometimes when I watched her face I could tell she was thinking about him. She'd stare out the window and watch the wind move the pine trees outside, humming to herself. The sound made a prickling loneliness rise up in me. Occasionally, at a church dance or when a pretty girl sat next to me on the bus ride to school, my heart would pick up and beat like the dickens, and I'd think for a minute about how soft that girl's skin must be or admire the way her hair shone under the sun. But those had been fleeting moments. I lived a very chaste life. Women belonged with marriage and marriage was a distant thing, years away, and what I had at the moment was passing school and working hard in the summers at whatever farm I could find, strengthening my body, my mind, and my character. My dad spoke often on the building of character. Girls did not help a man to build character.

My parents arrived that evening and ordered me home to shower and look after my younger brothers. I was irritated to be pulled away from where the action was, stuck in the role of baby-sitter, but I obeyed. Sitting around the dinner table listening to my little brothers talk about the swimming lessons and little league games, I felt that in the space of a day I had somehow changed, become so much older, more responsible. They

seemed suddenly so young, trying to act as if this week was the same as every other week, trying to behave like Colleen wasn't absent. But I could hear behind their raised voices. They were scared.

“You know what?” I said suddenly, setting my fork down. We were eating fish sticks and green beans from the garden, which I had cooked in the microwave. My brothers stopped eating. “Let's eat in the living room.”

This was something my parents would never have allowed. My brothers looked at each other, then grabbed their plates and headed for the couch. Like in the hospital, there was nothing good on TV. I flipped from news station to news station, PBS where two mountain goats ran at each other and clashed horns, Jeopardy, which my brothers regarded with disdain.

“The sports segment will be on soon,” I said, and flipped to the clearest news channel we received. The reporter was a blond woman we had seen so many times that we felt we knew her, although none of us could think of her name. She was standing in front of Old Faithful as it went up, the white water mixing into the white of the clouds behind her. A bad spray day, our family would have said. To really enjoy Old Faithful, the sky should be blue and clear. I stared at the woman's face, her dark red lips so carefully painted, her penciled in brows, her powdered skin. Something about her immediately put me off.

Then came the picture of Colleen. It was the picture from her high school yearbook. She had cast her long hair over her right shoulder and was looking at the camera a little uncertainly, a little shy.

“Colleen’s famous,” said my youngest brother, clapping his hands together.

We stared at the screen, which suddenly shifted to a view near Yellowstone Lake.

“It was near this very spot that Colleen Drucker, a summer employee at the Park, was attacked and horribly mauled by a grizzly bear,” said the reporter. “She escaped by rolling into the lake. Rescuers spent hours searching until she was rescued early this morning. She suffered multiple bites and lacerations, but doctors say that she is in stable condition and will be released within the week.”

The screen remained on the picture of Colleen, zooming in on her face, which started to look uncomfortably like the faces on milk cartons, the agonized black and white photos of kidnapped girls. She looked like a ruined child. Then the reporter spoke of Old Pete, his disappearance after the fires, the details of the recent attacks that everyone in town already knew everything about.

“So far the attempts by the park rangers to find and destroy the animal have failed,” the reporter said. The screen showed the famous picture of Old Pete. It was the first time I had really got a close look at the photo. The bear was looking into the camera stiffly, like a man being posed for a mug shot. His expression was inquisitive. He didn’t look like a killer.

My brother made his fingers into the shape of a gun. “Bang!” he said, pointing at the bear.

I was in the hallway when I saw the ranger coming. He was a ranger I didn’t know, a muscular middle-aged man in a green ranger’s uniform with skin like tanned leather. He wore his long black hair in a ponytail. I had seen few men in Eagle City with

hair long enough to touch their ears, let alone long enough to pull back into a ponytail. It seemed womanish, though the ranger was tall and seemed confident. He walked steadily toward me, not looking into any of the other rooms.

“You come to see Colleen?” I asked. “The doctor is with her now. They’re changing her bandages.”

The ranger extended his sun-browed hand. “Edward Wood. I was Colleen’s boss in the park.”

Good job looking out for her, I thought, but I held my tongue and shook the man’s hand. “I’m Andrew, Colleen’s brother.”

“You’re the boy that found her.”

“Yes,” I said, smarting a bit at the word boy.

“I don’t want to bother her,” said Ranger Wood, looking at the closed door. “I just wanted to bring her a card from everyone back at the lodge.”

“That’s nice,” I said. I could not stop looking at this man’s ponytail. It was like seeing a beard on a woman. “Better than all these bears people are bringing her.”

“Bears?”

“Teddy bears,” I said. “Toys. It’s supposed to be a joke. Colleen’s being a good sport about it.”

“She’s a good girl,” said the ranger, looking down at the card in his hands.

There was a moment of silence. I could hear the doctor talking in Colleen’s room, but I couldn’t make out the words. He sounded cheerful.

“You catch Old Pete yet?”

Ranger Wood’s face flushed under his tan.

“We’re still looking,” he said.

“I want to come along,” I said. The minute I said it, the idea felt right. I wanted to hunt this bear.

He frowned. “This is a grizzly, son,” he said. “It’s dangerous.”

“She’s my sister,” I said, feeling desperation rising up in me. The doctor might be in there right now telling Colleen that she could go home soon. Then I would go back to being just a farmhand. To hunt the bear would be a great adventure, the kind of story that I could tell my grandchildren. I would have got down on my knees and begged Ranger Wood if I thought it would move him.

The ranger coughed into his hand.

“I don’t know,” he said. “It’s not protocol to take along people outside the forest service. There are liability issues.”

“Please,” I said. “For Colleen.” I tried to stand up straight like a man and look him in the eyes. “I can handle myself.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” he said.

The door opened. The doctor looked startled to see two men standing in front of the door. We moved aside to let him pass. I followed Ranger Wood into Colleen’s room.

“I just came by to say hello,” he said. She smiled up at him. She obviously liked him and was glad to see him. Her expression brightened considerably, but I could see a measure of disappointment in her face. Someone had come in all the way from Yellowstone, and it had not been Mark.

He held out the card to her and she took it gingerly. She did not open it, but looked at the unicorn on the cover for a minute before laying the card on her night table.

“I hope I’m not causing too much inconvenience missing work,” she said.

“We’re getting along fine,” he said. “You just focus on getting better.”

In Colleen’s presence the ranger’s confidence melted away, leaving him stiff and uncomfortable. He kept looking at the IV going into her hand. He didn’t seem to know what else to say to her.

“Well,” he said a bit gruffly, “I have to get back. Just know we’re all thinking about you, praying for you to recover quickly.”

“Thank you,” she murmured.

He nodded at her, walked briskly out of the room, and turned toward me in the hall.

“Please let me come,” I said.

“Meet me at Grayling Lodge at six tomorrow morning.” Then he turned stiffly and walked away, taking long strides down the hall and around the corner. I let my breath out in a rush. I was going to hunt the bear.

Back in the room Colleen was looking at the inside of the card. Inside there was a mess of signatures and messages. Her eyes scanned quickly over them, not really taking the time to read them. Then she closed the card again, laid it in her lap.

“I’m tired,” she said, closing her eyes. “I want to go home.”

I spent the night before the hunt cleaning and oiling my rifle. My dad and I had made the rifle together when I was twelve years old, as a birthday present. I was left handed, and the gun was made specially to fit my grip, to pull tight into the curve of my arm like an extension of my body. Now, just four years later, it felt too small. I watched

from the kitchen window as my parents helped Colleen get out of the car and move up the steps to the front door. As I listened to them moving painfully up the stairs to Colleen's bedroom, I filled shells at the kitchen table. I had been hunting many times before, every single autumn since I was a boy, but only for deer or elk. In my mind this bear was unlike any other animal walking the earth. I could not get the name Old Pete out of my head. The bullets looked small in my hand, harmless. I wondered which of these little pieces of metal might find its way into the bear's body, which might cut the path between life and death.

The hunting party assembled at dawn. It was a smaller group than I expected, comprised of five or six rangers. The plan was to start where Colleen had been found down by the lake, where the smell of her blood might entice the bear. Otherwise the rangers had very little idea of where to look. They had been actively searching for more than a week. They were getting desperate.

Ranger Wood saw me standing at the back of the room. He motioned for me to come forward. I walked up to the front of the room, holding my rifle, hoping I looked capable of killing a bear.

"This is Andrew Drucker," Ranger Wood said to the other rangers. "He's going to tag along today."

I waved a hand at the rangers sheepishly. My ears were hot. Most of these men had seen me as a baby on my mother's hip. They'd been fishing with my dad just the weekend before. Now I was standing before them clutching my little rifle, asking them to let me be one of them, if only for a day.

“You’re going to have to leave the rifle here,” Ranger Wood said then.

The words came like a slap to my face. “What?”

“I can’t let you bring a firearm. You have to hang back and let the rangers do their job.”

“It’s not fair,” I shot at him, feeling shaky with disappointment.

“I’m sorry, son,” said Ranger Wood.

“I’m not your son.”

At the shore of the lake I was struck by how different the place looked in daylight, the sun glittering on the water, the air so full of light and the sound of birds. On the boat dock I saw a man wearing a white tank top and khaki shorts, so casual next to the rangers in their stiff green uniforms. He needed a haircut. I knew it must be Mark, my sister’s boyfriend. I also knew that he was not my kind of person. He looked like the epitome of all I knew about Oregon: tree-hugging, liberal, sandal-wearing hippies. At the boat he was chatting with the rangers like this was any other day, smiling way too much. My sister was looking out the window, staring at the phone, waiting for him. Looking at him made my fists clench.

We got in the boat. I stared at him as we crossed the lake. A faint, pleasant breeze blew at us. The park was quiet. There were no people walking the shore, no boats on the water. The presence of the bear had scared off the tourists. I felt lonely for my rifle, sitting next to these fine men who cradled their weapons so carefully.

On the other side Mark brought the boat right up to the shore. The stones where my sister had laid under the pine tree were still dark with her blood. I caught him looking at the spot.

“Call my sister,” I said to him before I stepped off the boat .

“Who?”

“Colleen.”

He stared at me as if he didn’t understand.

“Your sweetheart,” I said.

“Oh,” he said. “I tried to call.”

“Try harder.”

The rangers were waiting for me. Mark slapped at a mosquito on his leg and smiled easy at me. He was one of those guys that didn’t ruffle. He was one of those guys that didn’t care what people thought of him.

“Tell her you miss her.”

“Look,” said Mark in a cheerful voice, pushing a strand of hair out of his eyes. “We had a thing, sure. But we both knew that it was just for the summer. Dragging it out will only hurt her, you know?”

“She’s already hurt,” I said. Then I gave him a little push, just to let him know what I thought of him. He teetered on the edge of the boat, but caught his balance.

“Andy,” said Ranger Wood from the shore. “We’ve got a bear to hunt.”

I got off the boat.

“Wait for us here,” said Ranger Wood to Mark as I climbed the bank to join him. Then we hiked up into the forest to look for the ghost of a bear.

I had never seen a grizzly before that day. Grizzlies are huge and territorial, with humped shoulders, silver-tipped fur and long, flat claws. I had been taught what to do if I

saw one. Don't look into its eyes. Back away slowly. If you have to run, run downhill, because the bear has more trouble running that way. If you climb a tree, because a grizzly can't climb trees with his flat claws, make sure it is a strong tree. A grizzly has the power to knock it down. But I had never seen a live grizzly, not in all the years we'd been coming to the park. I could only imagine.

The bear came to us. It appeared near West Thumb, suddenly emerging from between the dark trees like the answer to a forgotten prayer. We had been hiking into the forest most of the day without seeing anything but camp robber jays, chipmunks, and elk. When the bear appeared, looking at each one of us with intelligent brown eyes, we all froze.

"It's him, sure as shooting," murmured one of the rangers. "No tag."

"Quiet," said Ranger Wood.

The bear sized us up, and decided that we did not constitute a threat. He dropped down from his hind legs, sitting on the pine-needled forest floor like a fat old man in his living room. He grunted at us, and leaned and smelled the air. Then he looked away. It would have been easier if he'd attacked. It would have felt justified. But Old Pete wasn't angry or interested. He was just doing what bears do. He was lounging in the forest. Like nothing else mattered.

Ranger Wood moved forward with a panther-like grace, pulled his gun to his shoulder, and aimed. The old grizzly raised his head to look at the gun. He straightened to stand on his hind legs and sniff at us one more time, trying to understand the smell of seven men on the verge of panic. I remember that I was holding my breath. Then Ranger Wood fired. The bullet hit Old Pete in the chest. The bear's body twisted as he fell

backward away from us. His mouth opened but no sound came. He looked right at me. Then the woods erupted in gunfire as the other rangers fired too, and the bear stumbled. He thudded to the ground, groaning. Bullets pelted his fur. Then he gave a great sigh and he died.

The rangers spent the next hour solemnly documenting the death of the bear, taking pictures of the bear with a Polaroid camera. One of them cut into Old Pete's belly to see what they would find. There were freshly eaten huckleberries, part of a can of tuna, and a banana. Ranger Wood, who had already been looking a bit green around the gills, took one look at that banana peel in a puddle of blood on the forest floor, and ran off into the bushes to throw up his breakfast.

I stared at the bear's body. The rangers moved around busily, taking pictures from all angles, taking notes, talking to each other in hushed voices. I was not one of them. They had forgotten me. I wanted to touch the bear. I crouched in front of him when they were done cutting him open. I grabbed hold of his front paw, as big and heavy as a child's head. He smelled like lake and blood, the scent that had risen off my sister when I found her. It had been two days since the attack, but already it felt like a lifetime. I put my hand on the bear's head, petting the crest of its huge skull. He was simply enormous, still hot with life. I could not picture my little sister standing against this animal, facing him down, drawn into his huge, muscled arms. I could not see how she could have survived.

I drove all the way to Eagle City with a Polaroid of the dead bear laying on the passenger seat of my truck. Once I got to the house, I showed the picture to my brothers.

It was the most gruesome, impressive thing they'd ever seen. They crowded over it.

Then I went to show it to Colleen. I knew she wasn't squeamish. She had seen dead animals before. She would want to know about the bear. Still, standing in front of her bedroom door, my legs and heart felt heavy. There was nothing really to be gained, showing her a picture of a dead bear. But it felt like a thing that must be done.

I knocked.

"Come in," she said.

She was lying in bed looking fresh out of the shower. Sitting next to her was her friend Marcy, a little red-head that I'd seen at school with her several times. They had obviously been laughing. The smiles were still fading from their faces.

"Hi Andy," said Marcy.

"If this is a bad time, I can come back."

"No," said Colleen. "Come in."

I pulled out the chair from in front of her vanity, this little table and mirror my parents had bought her when she turned sixteen to sit and primp at. In the mirror, Andrew Drucker looked very uncomfortable. The girls looked at me expectantly. My mouth was dry as cotton. I thought about excusing myself and retreating back to the kitchen for a glass of water. I needed some more time, I thought, before I showed them.

"Dad said you went to Yellowstone."

"Yeah."

"How was the weather?"

"Sunny," I said. "Blue skies."

I put the picture of the bear in her lap. She took hold of it slowly, turned it around so she could see the shape of Old Pete's head. Marcy turned her face away, coughed delicately into her hand. She got up and walked to the other side of the room.

"Oh," said Colleen.

"I'm sorry," I said. "They all thought you should see."

"He looks so small," she said.

"He was the biggest animal I've ever seen."

"Did you shoot him?" she said, her brows coming together.

"No." I thought of the easy way Ranger Wood had squeezed the trigger, without hesitation. How much that little action meant to us.

"Did you see Mark?" she asked, looking at me. I was trapped by the earnestness in her blue eyes. I could not lie to her.

"He drove us across the lake."

"You saw him," she said, breathing out slow, still looking at the bear. "Did he say he would come and see me?"

Now I would break her heart.

"I don't think he'll be coming," I said. "I don't think he'll be calling either."

Marcy stifled a gasp. Colleen closed her eyes. Her hand holding the picture started to tremble. Then she was crying, clutching the picture between her hands, tears running down her face over this boy. I got up. The door opened and my mother bustled in. With one look at Colleen, she rushed forward, scooted herself on the bed next to Colleen, and pressed her injured child's face to her chest.

"Baby," she said, smoothing Colleen's hair. "What happened?"

Colleen gave her the picture. My mother glanced at it no more than a second.

Then she looked up at me with the hardest look she's ever given me.

"Take this away," she said.

I took the picture from Colleen's bandaged hand.

"Now get out," said my mother.

I slunk to the door without a word. I would be no hero in this house. On the back porch I watched the sun sink into the mountains. The screen door opened and out stepped Marcy, her little freckled face pale as paper.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi."

"It's nice of you, hanging out with my sister."

She shook her head, shaking her red mane of hair over her shoulders. "She's my best friend."

We stood for a moment without talking.

"Was it awful, killing the bear?" she said, leaning against the porch.

"I didn't kill it," I said. "I watched."

"It sounds awful," she said. "I don't know how Colleen stands it."

"She's pretty strong."

"She is," said Marcy. "I don't know if I could take it. Getting attacked, having to hear the doctor's talk about how her scars will be and all that stuff. And now getting dumped."

I didn't know what to say to her. When she put it that way, I thought I could see better into my sister's heart, into the way she might see this whole situation. This thing

with the bear was only the beginning. This was a woman's nightmare, something that would keep her from looking at her body in the mirror. Something that would change everything. And I had done nothing about it.

"I shouldn't have showed her the picture," I said. "It was a stupid thing to do. I shouldn't have told her."

"No," said Marcy, her hand with its pink nail polish suddenly on my arm. Her hand felt cool as river water. I stared down into her green eyes, which were flecked with little bits of gold.

"It was brave," she said.

My chest swelled with an emotion I couldn't name. I thought I might bust into tears, bawl like a pathetic little baby in front of this girl. But she cried instead. Her face turned pink and splotchy. Her eyes filled with tears.

"I wish there was something I could do," she cried in a frail, broken voice. I put my arms around her, and she leaned into me. Her body felt so light and fragile, something utterly breakable. I felt a shudder run through her. She clung to the front of my shirt, holding onto me. She thought I was as strong as Colleen. She thought I was brave.

"There now," I said, and she looked up at me. Then I bent and kissed Marcy. I just put my lips on hers. I tangled my fingers in her thick red hair and I kissed her for all I was worth. It was my first kiss. Years later we would tell our children we had met because of a grizzly bear. We would leave out everything except for this: I searched all through the night, and just before morning I found her. It's the only story I can tell where I can see myself as the hero.

### WHAT THE GOOD IS

Mary got out of jail time because she was pregnant. She supposed it was something to be thankful for. All these mornings as she hovered over the toilet giving up her breakfast she thought, I could be in jail. If I was not pregnant I would be behind iron bars. Her vision of jail came from Western movies that her father watched when she was growing up. In the movies, the cells always looked so damp and chilly. There was nothing she could think of worse than cold. The night she had spent in jail had been the coldest night of her life.

Her boyfriend, Brian, called her crazy. He said that cold was a part of living in Idaho. An Idaho woman, born and raised in the mountain country like Mary, shouldn't complain about the temperature. He started the day by making fun of the baggy gray sweatpants she wore all the time. "Woman," he said, "it's the middle of July."

"It's seventy-two degrees," she said, an angry shiver moving up her spine. "But how would you know?"

He looked at her coolly, a look that told her that any trouble in their lives was her fault. She was the one who had insisted they go the straight and narrow, and this is what the straight and narrow meant to Brian: television. Hour after hour, day after day, the

screen glowing into the deep hours of night, Eagle City's measly four channels were Brian's life.

"You never get off the couch," said Mary in a sharp voice. She was becoming a nag, she knew it, knew that it wouldn't do any good, but she couldn't help it. "Not even for me."

Brian didn't reply. His eyes drifted back to the television. Mary thought about what they could be doing at that moment. Back in their old life Brian would have laid a map of Eagle City down on the coffee table and marked the places they would hit when night fell. "You take this side," he would say. "It's easier. Less lights." He'd go over with her again the types of car stereos that were worth the effort and those that just looked like they were. He would drill her on how to disarm car alarms. She tried to learn quickly what he had to teach her, to swallow her fear and her guilt. She'd had such respect for him in those moments, those times when he was acting like a real professional. She missed respecting him.

"If I get you the newspaper," she said in a gentler tone, "will you look for a job?"

Brian turned up the volume on the television until it was loud enough to fill the room with a low buzzing sound. He was watching a commercial for life insurance. An older man talked about his heart condition while flipping burgers on the grill outside a red brick house. "I just want to know that my family will be taken care of," the man said. "United Heritage gives me the comfort of knowing that they will."

"Maybe you should ease up on the hamburgers," said Brian. "Give your heart a break."

He always spoke to the people on TV with concern and interest. Mary could remember him speaking that way to her in the days when he was trying to get in good with her, practically singing at her in the front of his old pickup. “You are sweeter than wine, Mary doll,” he said once. She knew that he loved her by the way he’d touched her hair. She let it grow long so he’d have more of it to run his fingers through. She put mayonnaise in her hair on the days when Brian went to the welfare office to give it shine. She’d sit in the kitchen with a warm towel wrapped around her head and dream of him touching her hair the way he did when they first met, before he’d brought her into his world and before she’d tried to pull them both out of it. Brian would come home looking tired and ashamed and say, “It stinks in here. What you cooking?” and then he’d make a beeline for the couch and focus on the people on the screen, people outside of Idaho, who could break the law without consequences, who were cleaner and more beautiful than Mary could ever hope to be.

She put on her bathrobe and went outside barefoot to steal the next-door neighbor’s newspaper. The neighbor’s dog barked angrily from inside the house but she knew no one was home; the couple who lived there worked at the meat packing plant from six in the morning to six at night. As she slipped the slightly damp newspaper into the front of her robe she noticed her heart beating fast. No matter how often she stole it always put her right on the edge of panic. She’d broken into cars for ten months and never been able to take a thing without her hands shaking so badly that she could hardly go through with it.

The night the policeman had shone the light in her face she’d dropped the stereo. It’d smashed on the pavement into what seemed like a hundred pieces. She’d bit her

tongue hard to keep from calling out for Brian, so hard that a trickle of blood leaked from the corner of her mouth as the cop pushed her down onto the hood of the car. The policeman was shocked that this sort of thing could happen in such a small town in Idaho. He'd been rough with her, yanking her arms around behind her, telling her that people like her was what is wrong with the world, groping her as he searched for anything else that she might have on her. What was left of the stereo crunched underneath their feet. This wouldn't have happened to a professional, she'd thought. I'm not a professional.

She'd had bruises on her arms from the cop's hands. She hadn't known at the time that she was pregnant but when she stood in front of the judge a few weeks later, after being given a pregnancy test by the jail's physician, she said: "He brutalized me. I could have lost my baby. I know what I did was wrong but he had no right to treat me that way." She showed the judge a Polaroid of her arm, pointed out the clear fingerprints all around her bicep. "See," she said, as her court-appointed lawyer had trained her. "He brutalized me."

The judge did see. He told her that if she was good from now on she could keep out of jail. She was assigned a parole officer. After the baby was born she would spend three months in jail unless the parole officer could attest to her good behavior. "You don't know what an opportunity I am giving you, young lady," said the judge. "You don't know how lucky you are."

While she was outside she got the mail. There were three bills, one from the power company for over two hundred dollars, marked "past due," one from the phone company for one hundred and fifty that was labeled "final notice" and one from the local Sears for twenty-five dollars for a new bra she'd bought when her breasts had swelled up.

She put the bills in the pocket of her robe. She put the newspaper on the couch beside Brian. He did not look away from the television.

She said, "Please look for a job. I know it's not what you do and I know you don't like it. But do it for the baby." Then she was overcome with a wave of nausea. She knew that the morning sickness was supposed to go away after a few months, but it had not. After twenty minutes in the bathroom she came out and got the newspaper from where she'd left it. At the kitchen table she sipped a can of tepid 7-Up and read the want ads. She couldn't find a pen and circled the ads that looked promising with the wand of an old bottle of red nail polish, and while she waited for the paper to dry she painted her nails. Then she pressed the phone to her ear with the palm of her hand and made the first call.

"Hello, I'm calling about the ad you put in the newspaper."

"For which job?" said the woman who answered. "Housekeeping or night clerk?"

"I'd prefer night clerk," said Mary.

"That job's been filled," said the woman.

"I can do housekeeping," said Mary. She closed her eyes for a moment and remembered the way her mother had looked when she came home from cleaning houses, the way her hair had hung limply in her face and her clothes had smelled like bleach and ammonia. The memory made her stomach cramp painfully.

"That job's been filled as well," said the woman.

"Is there a job that hasn't been filled?" asked Mary.

"Not at the current time," said the woman.

Mary hung up.

“Hello, Access Cable Company,” said the next voice, a man this time.

“I’m calling about the ad in the paper,” said Mary.

“Great! We are always looking for people to join our team. What’s your name?”

“Mary Stanton.” She spelled it for him.

“I’m Phil,” said the man. “Have you ever worked for a cable company before?”

“No.”

“That’s okay. We can train you. As long as you’ve got a good attitude. Do you work well with people?”

“I think so,” said Mary.

“Mostly you’d be taking calls from customers. It requires real people skills. It’s a great job. You’ll really feel like part of a team. And the pay’s good. After three months you get a raise, and at six months you’ll get another one.”

“Great,” said Mary. “When can I come in?”

There was a long pause. In the living room Brian said something to the TV people and then laughed.

“And the best thing is that you get free cable. Six hundred and forty three channels. All the TV you can watch, when you’re not working, of course.”

Mary hung up.

There was only one more ad circled in nail polish. It read, “Apply today, work tomorrow, at Nelson’s Staffing Services!” Mary called. Fifteen minutes later she was standing in the living room in the only dress she owned that fit her anymore, a black polyester dress with no waistline that she’d worn in band in junior high.

“I’m taking the truck. Be back in a while.”

“Get me some cigarettes while you’re gone,” Brian said.

“No,” said Mary. “I’m not going to be able to quit if you sit there blowing smoke all over me.”

“It’s my truck. If you use it you’ve got to give me something.” Then he softened. “You look real nice.”

“Thanks,” she said and leaned down to kiss him goodbye.

In the car she thought of what Brian would do if she drove away and never came back. He would go back to stealing, she was pretty sure. He might be better off. Then she thought of the millions of faceless men in the world. She pictured men in suits with briefcases strolling down the sidewalk. She saw men in khaki Dockers and flannel shirts rolled up just below their elbows, revealing the finely curling hair on their arms, always strong, always capable. The men of the world wore white tee shirts and crisp cotton boxers. They wore watches and shiny shoes. They got haircuts and drank beer from glasses. The idea was comforting to her.

She stopped at the 7 Eleven, the only gas station close to the house, to fill up the truck before she drove across town. She was surprised to see Raymond there, the clerk who usually worked the store during the night shift. Raymond was too tall and too thin, red-headed and covered with freckles, but he wore a nice cologne. Mary had always wanted to ask him what cologne it was so that she could buy some for Brian but she thought he might get the wrong idea. And maybe she wouldn’t like it as much on Brian.

“Mary,” Raymond said as she came in to pay. “You look nice today.”

"I'm trying to get a job," she said.

"Good for you. Well you sure look nice."

"Thanks." She felt around the pocket of her coat and closed her hand around the last twenty-dollar bill nervously. There was a ten at the house taped inside the freezer, a joke when she and Brian had money for pretty much whatever they wanted. And there was this twenty. And that was it. "You working day shift now?"

"I got promoted. Now I have to pay for daycare for my two little girls."

"You could have said no, couldn't you? To the promotion?"

"I guess so." His eyes crinkled up around the edges as he smiled. "But more money in my pocket is more food in their mouths. You'll know that soon enough, I guess. When are you due?"

"Three months. April tenth."

Ray smiled. "The gas comes to eighteen dollars even." Mary knew that; she'd pumped exactly that amount so she would have two dollars to spend on something else, anything else. Two dollars was so little, like nothing. She could buy a pack of gum. A candy bar. Nothing with substance. She felt her face getting red, hot frustrated tears rising.

"Tell you what," said Raymond, looking into her face, "I'll pay for your gas today. You need some money to buy lunch at your new job."

"No, Ray. I couldn't."

"You'll pay me back."

"Ray."

"Got to keep food in you, for the baby."

Mary looked at the tile on the floor. “Okay. But I’ll pay you back next week.”

“I know you will.”

“Thank you.”

“You did a good thing,” said Ray suddenly, “giving up with the cars.”

Mary’s breath caught in her throat. “What are you talking about?”

“I used to do some stuff like that myself. Getting caught was the best thing that ever happened to me. Jail’s where I found Jesus.”

Mary didn’t know what to say. She was confused by the easy way he had confessed, by the way he didn’t seem to think she was a bad person.

“Did your boyfriend quit that stuff too?”

“Yes,” she murmured. “He quit for the baby.”

“He’s no good for you, Mary,” said Ray quietly. “I saw him too. He was hiding in the bushes that night. He was just watching what that cop did to you.”

Mary gave him the meanest look she knew how to manufacture. Then she lifted her head up, turned away from Ray and his kindness, and walked out of the store.

Nelson’s Staffing Services gave her a job stuffing envelopes at a company called QuickStuff. Mary got there just before eleven. It was a warehouse divided in two, one half for the large complicated machines that pressed and sealed thousands of envelopes each day, and the other half, lined with picnic tables and desks where a crowd of tired-eyed employees separated piles of papers into stacks that they crammed into envelopes

and placed in boxes to be sent to the other side. They were working on a huge order from an insurance company, which would last them the week, the supervisor said.

Mary's back hurt after fifteen minutes. She had several long and stinging paper cuts in less than an hour. She sat at a picnic table with three other people: Raoul, Gloria, and Jake. Raoul was eleven years old, the son of one of the Mexican immigrants who ran the sealing machines. His dad's sister was a supervisor, he explained. The kid stuffed more envelopes in an hour than the others combined. Gloria was in her late twenties. She immediately confessed that she had been in jail three times for the stupid things she'd done on crystal meth and she had three kids for the same reason. And Jake was a caveman, his heavy forehead threatening to swallow up his eyes, the weight of his big-boned frame slightly lifting all the other corners of the picnic table. He was nineteen like Mary and she suspected that he was somewhat retarded. All he could talk about was getting himself a piece of land someday, a farm with cows and horses and chickens, and getting himself a woman to make his breakfast.

Mary decided to hate them all. Low people, that's what they were. She hated Raoul for how fast and cheerful he was. She didn't like that he was making the same pay that she was, \$6.50 an hour, even though he was working illegally. She hated Gloria because she made Mary think of the cold hard floor in the jail cell that was waiting for her. And she hated Jake for the way he looked at her breasts with his eyes half-closed. She sat at the table for an hour and a half and kept her mind occupied by reading the names on the envelopes. Milo Everett. Sally Slooper. Gertrude Frankfurter. Geraldo Gomez. Mildred Harris.

She tried to imagine them all as different people, all out there in the world, outside of Idaho with lives protected by the papers that moved back and forth in her hands, but she could really only imagine an old couple who reminded her of the grandparents she had in Nebraska, whom she had visited with her father when she was ten. The old man in her mind's eye had a round, bald head and thick glasses. His pants seemed to go up too high on him. He had false teeth. He spoke about the ways things were before the war. He spoke about the year's corn. He remembered the Depression. The old woman was somewhat younger but more fragile, hunched deeply at the shoulders. She wore a carefully crocheted shawl and a flowered dress. She smiled when she spoke, and her voice was unusually young to come from such a frail body. Mary thought that her grandmother must be her only pleasant relative, a nice person with a nice sounding name: Rosie Stanton. Her grandfather had died of kidney failure when she was thirteen but her grandmother still lived in Nebraska that Mary knew.

"Lunch break," announced Gloria, and she was gone.

"Let me buy you lunch," suggested Jake.

"No thanks," said Mary. "I have a boyfriend."

"It'd be just as friends."

"No, thank you."

"Did you bring a lunch?" said Raoul, the kid, when the others were gone. "Or are you going home?"

"There's nothing to eat at home," she said. "So I guess I'll stay here."

"I stay here too," said the boy. He looked healthy and intelligent, the way she'd want her child to look at eleven years old. She decided that she didn't hate him so much

as the others. “My dad likes to work through lunch hour,” he said. He pulled a brown paper sack from under the table. It contained what looked like a peanut butter sandwich, a small bag of pretzels, a banana, and a cup of lemon pudding.

“So you’re going to have a baby,” said Raoul.

Mary’s hands moved to cover her belly, as if she was suddenly discovering the bump there. Her body didn’t feel like her own. It didn’t feel real.

“Do you know if it’s a boy or a girl?”

“A girl,” said Mary.

“Did you see a picture at the doctor?”

“No. I can just tell.”

“Cool. What are you going to name her?”

“I don’t know yet,” said Mary. “But I’m thinking about Rose. Rose Stanton.” She tried to remember what Nebraska had looked like when she visited, or a specific thing that her grandmother had said to her, but all she could picture was the blue and cloudless expanse of untouched sky from the window of her daddy’s old Buick.

“That’s a good name,” said Raoul as he bit into his sandwich. “My sister’s middle name is Rosita. She’s a year younger than me. She has Tourets Syndrome—that’s when you jerk around and swear and stuff. But she takes medicine. It’s not too bad. I help her at school.”

“You must be a good student,” said Mary, liking the boy more every minute.

“I’m the best in my class. Dad says I have to be the best so I can go to college.”

“That’s a smart idea. Don’t sort mail the rest of your life. You go get yourself something good and hold on to it.”

“I plan on it,” said Raoul. “But sometimes I think that my sister’s going to have a rough time. It’s not her fault. She’s just got something bad inside her that’s got to get out sometimes.”

“I’m sure she’ll do fine with a brother like you,” said Mary, but she was lying. Some people didn’t have choices. Some people were screwed from birth. “And you’ve got a great dad. My daddy died last year. He had a heart attack.”

Raoul didn’t say anything.

“I miss him,” said Mary.

“You want my pudding?” asked Raoul. “I don’t really like lemon.”

Mary nodded and reached across the table. Raoul also didn’t have a spoon, but she was content to spend the rest of her lunch hour licking the sugary yellow mass off her fingers, thinking about how she and Raoul were both, in their own way, trying to get out of Idaho.

As she drove home she thought about the trip to Nebraska with her father. More than anything else she remembered the desperate sort of things that he’d said in those long hours in the car. “We’re going to be all right, you and I,” he said. “We’re going to have a lot of fun. We don’t really need your mama for that.” Later he cried, turned his face away to wipe it. “None of this is your fault, Mary. I want you to know that.” And finally he said, “I’d take her back. When she gets over this foolishness, I’ll take her back.” They drove up to the run-down farmhouse in some part of Nebraska that she couldn’t even remember, and her grandparents were standing on the porch, smiling. “Don’t tell your grandma about Mom,” said her father. “It’d break her heart.”

Mary had wanted to tell her grandma. She looked like the kind of woman who was too strong to get her heart broken over someone else's mistake. Mary had wanted to tug on the sleeve of her grandmother's dress and whisper, "My mama ran off with another man." But she hadn't. Now she wished that she could see her grandmother again, somehow, so she could tell her, "I'm alone here, and I'm having this baby, and I don't know what the good is."

The house was dark when she got home. The front door was unlocked and the first thing she noticed was that the TV was off. A cold feeling washed over her as she stared at its dark silhouette. Brian was gone. Where would he have gone without his truck? Then she thought that he might be robbing the 7-Eleven down the street. He wanted cigarettes. The police might be chasing him up the driveway any minute now, sirens screaming, washing the sky in red and blue lights, the policemen's guns out and cocked. Brian would look at her from under his mask and say, "I'm sorry I dragged you into this life, baby," before he went down or before he dropped the knife and they took him away. Or he might say, "It's all your fault. You should have bought me those cigarettes I asked for."

Brian said, "you're home," and he was standing in the doorway to the kitchen. He was smiling. Mary felt light-headed at the sight of him. He had combed his hair. "I've been waiting," he said.

"What's going on?" asked Mary.

"The power's been shut off," said Brian. "I would have called to tell you but I didn't know exactly where you were at."

He went into the kitchen and Mary followed. There were two plates on the table and a group of assorted candles that cast the room in a wavering light.

“I made salad,” said Brian, “and I got us some sandwiches at the 7-Eleven. I know it’s not much but it’s the best I could scrounge up with our ten dollars.”

“It’s good.” Mary’s hand closed briefly around the twenty that was still in her coat pocket.

“How was work?”

“Boring,” she said. “But it’s money.”

They sat at the table and ate in relative silence.

“Thank you,” said Mary when they finished, “for getting us dinner.”

“I wanted you to know I’m proud you got this job.”

It was like he was talking to one of his television people. “Thanks,” said Mary.

“I want to get a job too. An honest job. I want to be a good dad, like you said.”

“You will be,” said Mary. In the candlelight he was softer. She reached across the table and touched his face. Its unshaved roughness reminded her that he was real, a real man with warmth in him. He took her hand from his face and kissed her knuckles.

“We’re going to make it,” he said. “We don’t got a choice.”

Then he fished a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it in the open candle flame.

She spent the next few days at work doing math over and over in her head. At \$6.50 an hour, she made close to \$50.00 a day, minus tax. At that rate, it would be a few days before she could pay the power bill. She was embarrassed by the way that she must smell now, after a few days without a shower, and her scalp felt greasy and itchy to her.

As her hands moved from pile to pile she thought about the kind of meals she'd cook when the stove worked again. Pancakes before she left in the morning. She'd put the syrup in its own little bowl and warm it in the microwave. She'd come home and make meatloaf with a strip of bacon on top. Baked potatoes. Green beans.

The second night she came home Brian set up candles in the living room and she called for pizza and paid with what was left of her twenty dollars. The refrigerator was off so they had to eat as much as they could. Stuffed, Mary laid on her back on the living room floor and listened as Brian told her about the shows he used to watch on television about families and the problems they had. She lay with her eyes closed and imagined that he was reading to her. It seemed like Brian had traveled a lot of places and seen a lot of things. His knowledge of the world seemed so much greater than her own. She wanted to fall asleep listening to his voice. She lay with her eyes closed and wished that he would kiss her on the forehead, like her father used to, and carry her to bed. But Brian lay on the floor next to her and looked at the shadow that the TV made on the living room floor, bigger than it really was, and smoked his cigarettes.

At work the fourth day Mary came across the name "Rose Stanton" among the life insurance envelopes she was stuffing. She stared a long time at the envelope before, her heart pounding in her chest, she tucked it neatly into the tight waist of her sweat pants and brought it home. While the sun was still out she sat on the back step and went over and over the neat blue letters. "Rose Stanton," they spelled. "2840 Cherry Ln. Livingston, Kansas." When she closed her eyes she could still see the word "Kansas" as clear as day. She went in the house and dug an old address book out of a box, a book

someone had given her for her thirteenth birthday. In pink pen in the S section she had written that Rosie and Edward Stanton lived in Rural Route 8, Box 352 in Wilsonville, Nebraska. Mary put the insurance envelope and the page of her address book side by side and looked at one and then the other.

On the phone the operator told her that there was Rose Stanton in Livingston, Kansas, but it was unlisted. "Is Wilsonville, Nebraska close by?" asked Mary.

"I don't know much about anyplace called Wilsonville," said the operator, "but I have an aunt near Livingston and if Dorothy had lived at her house, she could have spit out her window and hit a Nebraska corn field."

"What you got there?" asked Brian from behind her. Mary hung up the phone, folded the envelope and the page from the address book together, and put them back into the waist of her pants.

"I'm trying to find my grandma's address," she said.

"You going to send her a letter or something?" said Brian, "About the baby?"

Mary nodded. She let Brian kiss her gently on the lips. Under her clothes the letter pressed against her damp skin, against the baby who was finding its shape in the dark.

On payday Raoul brought Mary an extra pudding at lunch. She brought a spoon. Gloria brought pictures of her three kids. They looked good to Mary. In the pictures they looked happy. It was Gloria who could not smile.

“They’re my babies,” said Gloria. “I’ll get them back once I get a steady income.” It was ten minutes to quitting time and they were all anxious to receive their paychecks, which they’d been told would be handed out at the end of the day.

Jake had moved on to hitting on Gloria and Mary at the same time. “I like women with blond hair,” he said.

“That’s nice, Jake,” said Gloria, “but mine’s not real.”

“I like women who play hard to get,” said Jake, looking at Mary’s breasts from under his heavy brows.

“She doesn’t play hard to get,” said Raoul. “She just doesn’t like you.”

“Shutup,” said Jake. “You’re just a kid.”

“I know a lot,” said Raoul. “I know that Gloria doesn’t like you. Neither does Mary.”

Jake suddenly paused in his sorting to shoot a rubber band at Raoul. The band struck the kid hard on the forehead, raising a purplish-red mark immediately. Mary felt her whole body tense. She didn’t know if the boy would cry or if he would shoot back but she didn’t know if she could tolerate either. Raoul stood up. His face was very pale.

“You’re a bad man,” he said calmly, “and that will catch up with you.”

“You want to fight, kid?”

“I’m going to get my dad,” Raoul said, and ran off towards the other side of the warehouse.

“You’re in for it now,” said Gloria. “His dad’s a Latino tank.”

Mary felt tears come to her eyes. Raoul’s face had been furious but resolute. He had moved into immediate action. He had evaluated his options and made the right

choice. That boy knew that his life would depend on what he did when people pushed him.

It wasn't much of a fight between Jake and Raoul's dad. Both were big men but Raoul's father was a lot smarter. And he knew to take the fight outside. In the parking lot the employees, checks in hand, cheered at every punch that Jake took, and laughed when he sat down hard on the asphalt and said he was sorry about what he did to the kid. Mary was as proud as if Raoul had been her own. There is something like that in me, she thought. There is some kind of strength.

Mary was still thinking about Raoul as she stood in line at the bank to cash her check. The teller put four crisp fifties into her hand. It was only two blocks to the power company. She just had to drive two blocks and the lights would come on at the house. She could stand under the hot shower spray and rub the smudges of ink off her fingers. She could make dinner and Brian might come to the kitchen table and watch the heat rise out of the meatloaf and he might say, "I'm sure proud of you," again. She would meet with her parole officer the next day with optimism. "I got a job," she would say, "and things are looking up."

Or Brian would turn on the television. And things would go back to the way they were. Mary would live out her life in Idaho, raise her baby in the city always talking about getting out. Always talking, she thought, and never doing. Someday Brian would get tired of being good, and he would go back to what he knew best. He would be a criminal. He would probably go to jail and leave her alone with the baby. And suddenly

she knew that she would be all right if that happened. She could take care of this baby on her own. She could handle it just fine.

Then there was a sensation deep inside her like popcorn popping. The baby was moving. She had never felt it before. She put her hand on her belly, tried to imagine the small, alien body reaching out its hand to her. It's just you and me, she thought. I have to do right by you. I am alive, it said to her in the bank parking lot, churning the depths of her. I am alive and someday I will come out.

Mary didn't drive to the power company. Instead she drove towards home. She stopped at the 7-Eleven. She pumped gas into the truck. She laid three granola bars, a large bottle of apple juice, soap, shampoo, a hair brush, and a baby bottle with a picture of Winnie the Pooh on it on the counter. To one side there was a road atlas of the United States for twelve dollars. As she waited, Mary opened the map and found both Livingston and Wilsonville. They looked like they were right next to each other but once she understood how to tell how much distance there was in an inch she saw that they were about two hundred miles apart.

"I'll take the map too," she told Raymond.

"That will be twenty-nine dollars and sixteen cents."

Mary handed him one of the stiff fifty-dollar bills.

"Keep the change," she said. "For what I owe you."

"Thanks. We're still friends, then?"

"I don't know," said Mary.

“It’s illegal to turn the power off if there’s a baby living there,” said Raymond. “I thought you might want to know.”

“Thanks,” said Mary.

She got in the truck. In her belly she felt the movement of the baby, like little goldfish swimming in a bowl. The sky was turning a deep blue as she crossed the county line. A woman could live two lives, she was starting to understand, and both were hard. There were things that a person falls into naturally, without giving much thought at all to right and wrong. She was violating her parole. She was stealing Brian’s truck but she didn’t feel the usual panic. Peace washed over her like warm water. Mary gripped the steering wheel hard at the ten and two spots, just as her father had, and, like him, she drove toward the distant Teton mountains that had always stood between them and the world. And she drove out of Idaho.