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Lake Salt: A Collection of Short Stories

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of

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Abstract

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Master of Fine Arts

This collection of short stories explores the different ways in which women experience suffering. The narrative focuses on the daily lives of women who have undergone some type of heartbreak. While the stories occasionally include the incident which leads to despair, the collection is more concerned with the way women function after a personal tragedy. The stories show the grace of people who continue to move forward when their lives are filled with suffering. Sexuality enters the stories and exposes both the triumph and destructive nature of sexuality. A critical introduction which explains how complication and beauty amplify story proceeds the collection.

Key Words: suffering, women, beauty, sexuality

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This collection is dedicated to my husband, Charles.

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Introduction: Beauty in Complication

My writing aesthetic has risen from a need to represent suffering. My short story collection is filled with moments of suffering, darkness, human frailty, recklessness, and poverty. As a writer I am haunted by the fact that I keep finding myself in difficult material and hard terrain. At the same time, I want beauty and wonder to arise in my stories. I push for it in my sentences and in the images I create.

I often feel a need to justify the darkness in my stories and wonder if I am engaging in this type of material for the sake of being gritty. What has come of this investigation is a conviction that by engaging in difficult material, I am allowing beauty to arise more potently. Beauty is linked to complication in an interdependent way. In this collection I lay the groundwork and do the dirty business of finding and exposing beauty, watching it rise.

Often things that are beautiful come out of violence, even things that aren't typically associated with violence. Take a baby, for instance. A baby is perhaps the most unanimously beautiful thing on earth, but the birth of a baby comes after hours of violence, pain, and risk. A baby is literally born covered in blood and excrement. So that even something as unequivocally beautiful as a baby, comes from violence and complexity. There is a human toll that comes with the creation of human experience.

I find that my writing must confront human suffering. There is no way around it. My stories focus less on the causes of suffering than on a prolonged human state of suffering. I am interested in what happens after tragic moments. I am interested in how people function and simultaneously manage anger, hope, and despair. I am captivated by this phenomenon; that those filled with despair continue to move, to go about the day, to swim. William Faulkner, in his Nobel Prize banquet speech, said that the purpose of fiction is to show "the human heart in

conflict with itself.” I am interested in that conflict: most particularly in the conflict of being in despair and still having to participate in daily and mundane actions. I am interested in diurnal suffering.

In my stories, suffering exists. Daily life goes on. It is through the lens of daily activities that suffering is examined. In the story “Libby”, a woman knows her husband is having an affair. She deals with this by scouring the kitchen. In “No Red at Night” two pregnant teenagers attempt to decorate their apartment. The action in the stories are not the affair, or details about the pregnancies. The action and plot propel forward from a motivation to keep going; an old professor of mine used to say that it is a triumph of human nature that we are not wiggling on the floor like worms, because our end is death. In my stories, continuing to move through the day is a triumph. Filling up the sink with soapy water is an act filled with grace. But we are also confronted with the futility of the soapy water and thereby immersed in what Faulkner described as “the human heart in conflict with itself.”

For Aristotle, “The element of the wonderful is required in tragedy” (28). I find that it is not enough to have a solely dark story. While I focus on the difficulties of a human existence, I work to bring some wonder into a story. There is a situation in nature that illustrates the type of wonder alongside suffering, which I work for in my stories. When an animal is struck on an expressway, it is often their natural reflex to muster up enough strength to crawl or limp to the side of the road where they will die. I am struck by this last will, this last dignity. It feels like a great triumph. But it also seems futile; in one moment the animal would die anyway. In my stories, I understand that characters washing dishes will not take care of the larger problems in their lives. It will not undo death, violence or betrayal. But washing the dishes is also dignified, wonderful, and filled with hope. We know, for instance, in “No Red at Night” that the terrifying

problems the teenagers face will not be fixed by trying to decorate their apartment, we understand the futility, but we also see the grace and triumph to at least try. Virginia Woolf proposes there is a protest to human suffering in our “natural delight in humor and comedy, in the beauty of earth, in the activities of the intellect, and in the splendor of the body” (*Common Reader* 218). It would be easy to describe my characters as delusional, perhaps they are, but I also find that they are in active protest to human suffering.

Representation of the difficulties in human emotion is required to bring about grace and triumph in fiction. In *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Italo Calvino discusses what he terms “lightness.” In it he tries to reconcile “the adventurous, picaresque inner rhythm” which inspired him to write with the “frantic spectacle of the world, sometimes dramatic and sometimes grotesque” (4). He understands the problem of trying to write a beautiful piece of art when your tools are the grotesque world. But Calvino finds that lightness will naturally rise when dealing with the complexities of the world. Language that has “weight, density, and concreteness of things, bodies and sensations” is the type of language that will prompt lightness (15). Those dark and complex stories lend the way for lightness and grace to appear. Calvino says that lightness comes in the form of “those minute, luminous trackings that are placed in the foreground and set in contrast to dark catastrophe” (6). So that while I am interested in the dailyness of suffering, I work in my writing to illuminate moments of grace and wonder. In “Northern Flicker,” wonder appears in a description of a northern flicker, which the character Masaki writes on a piece of paper as a way to learn the English language. In the face of death, Masaki has written this passage down, a completely useless and yet wonderful description of a bird.

The northern flicker:

This is a woodpecker. The male wear a mustache. They eat ants with a barbed tongue. They eat beetle larvae and berries. The Northern flicker will migrate south. They carve nest out of tree. The European Starling take away the Flicker's nesting sites. When they want a mate they bob their head and call, wik-a-wik-a-wik-a-wik-a. They happy in urban areas.

For me, lightness, grace, and the wonderful are only deserved when coming out of art that resembles the real world. The magical exists within our own world and can rise up when rooted in the complexities of an actual existence. There is power in our existence, there is truth—we don't need to create it, only write to allow truth to appear. In writing “The world enters the work as it enters our ordinary lives, not as world view or system but in sharp particularity” (Barthelme 21).

I find that my stories have to look like real life, to resemble it closely, for a truthful examination of human suffering and wonder. Flannery O'Connor points to the trap that fiction writers fall into which is that they are not “conscious of the texture of existence...of those concrete details of life that make actually the mystery of our position on earth” (68). For me, being a fiction writer is about more than forming words on a page. Writing has given intensity to the way that I experience the world. My senses are alive in observance of the world. I spot a nail hammered to a tree, I spot a rock that is geologically different from the others, I notice the feel of Velcro across my skin, I look for the variant blues in the sky. I must write the observed world into my fiction. Flannery O'Connor speaks of a writer's necessity for engagement in a sensual world:

The nature of fiction is in large measure determined by the nature of our perceptive apparatus. The beginning of human knowledge is through the senses,

and the fiction writer begins where human perception begins. He appeals through the senses, and you cannot appeal to the senses with abstractions...the world of the fiction writer is full of matter. (67)

If I want a meaningful story, the reader must be able to experience the sensory things in our world; a crystal glass, an eyelet trimmed apron, the smell of a Russian olive, the slippery hot water—so that my place for wonder and suffering is a familiar place, not removed from real life, but representative of it. The conflict in my stories interplays with realism, so that the reader must confront the fact that the suffering they experience in reading is also the suffering of their own world. It is not enough for me to plop my characters in any old place and have them move around in a vague bubble. I give my characters a city, a street, and a home—and in that home there is a couch and a slip and a checkbook. Henry James says, “Success [is when] the author has produced the illusion of real life. The cultivation of this success, the study of this exquisite process, form, to my taste, the beginning and the end of the art of the novelist” (90). Henry James finds fiction inadequate unless it feels like real life; it is the resemblance of real life that qualifies fiction as an art. In my own fiction, I feel that the physical world must be alive in my story to give it meaning. Each physical image carries a symbolic weight. Flannery O’Connor said, “The short story requires more drastic procedures than the novel because more has to be accomplished in less space. The details have to carry more immediate weight” (70).

I took O’Connor’s guidance to write a paragraph in my story, “Northern Flicker,” which situates the story in a place:

It was a June that felt like March. The clouds clung to the sky, and seemed only to move in circles above the Salt Lake Valley. It would rain and a mist would form, light enough to think that the clouds could move on east with the air from a

whistle, but the clouds just stayed and got thicker and rained again. Everything was green and desert had no grip on the land.

I find this paragraph a success because it situates us in the sensory world. We can feel the rain and the mist and the movement of weather, and at the same time are situated in a concrete place—the Salt Lake Valley. The paragraph is doing symbolic work, such as in the line “desert had no grip on the land” which points to the abundance and potential despair that will follow in the story.

My stories open like a curtain being pulled back and suddenly, as readers, we are inside a story. There is little set-up, formal characterization or establishment of setting. The characters are straightforward, telling the events of the day, the life, but without any real reflection. Often the story functions as “a day in the life.” Action after action is described and relayed, but the narrator is not conscious of being in a story.

Often the conflict in my stories is due to a lack of awareness and retrospection on the part of the characters. There is little if any rising action or growing tension. Instead the tension of the story comes out of what the reader understands but the characters do not—the characters’ own terrible situations. In “No Red at Night” there are pregnant teenagers. They are smoking, shoplifting, and encountering danger. Yet the characters are completely unaware of how dysfunctional their situation is.

The settings for my stories are the kitchen, the living room, and the study. I am always going to the couch and to the kitchen sink. I enjoy making the ordinary domestic sphere beautiful. The domestic life acts as a last hope for healing. I am interested in places where power structures have diminished. Avrahm Yarmolinsky described Chekhov’s stories as being “so suspicious of power, associating it with its abuse, that he looked upon weakness with a forgiving,

almost an affectionate eye” (24). My characters are stripped of status, money, and education and are still characters of beauty. They require a social inquiry, and are characters with which I can watch human emotion more potently.

My characters have a need for contact and completion. They want returning love. Their foremost desire is to find love, but they choose their mates badly. When love has failed, they forge relationships that mimic love. Sometimes there is great tenderness in the forged relationship; sometimes the relationship is purely artificial. In the story “Sulfur in Water,” a teenage girl leaves an abusive relationship with her mother to live at a friend’s house, where she becomes sexually reckless.

Sometimes the relationships are redemptive. In “Salt Lake to Mona” a young man drives an hour and a half every weekend to be with his girlfriend, and by the end there is hope, but no guarantee that the two will come together. They can live neither together or apart.

The home is a place of intimacy. Triumph and failure of intimacy is often the conflict in my stories. Perhaps I keep going to the home, because it is in the home where we are most exposed with our hearts laid bare. The home has an inherent vulnerability. The home should be a place of safety, of refuge from the world, a place of protection from the physical elements. But underneath the cover of protection there is vast emotional risk. Sometimes my stories triumph in the face of these risks.

People in real life have both a hidden life and a visible life. Forster quotes the French Philosopher, Alain, who says “the hidden life is where we discover the pure passions, that is to say, the dreams, joys, sorrows and self-communings which politeness or shame prevent him from mentioning” (56). Forster goes on to claim “to express this side of human nature is one of the chief functions of the novel” (56). In “No Red at Night” the pregnant teenagers have encountered

betrayal and failure in their romantic relationships. They find a tenderness and love in the hidden life with each other.

Brittany lifted up my shirt and felt my stomach until the baby moved. The baby moved for a long time. Brittany's hand followed the baby's limbs that stuck out the furthest. The doctor said that the baby would move to the downward position anytime. I moved my hand to Brittany's stomach, which was barely showing with her clothes on, but skin on skin my hand could feel the expansion and I knew there was a baby inside.

"Have you felt the baby move yet?" I asked.

"Just this week." She said.

We took turns getting up to use the bathroom. The moon never rose.

In my stories there is a conversation regarding reckless sex. This collection looks at reckless sexuality similarly to the way John Ashbery views reckless art saying "Most reckless things are beautiful in some way, and recklessness is what makes experimental art beautiful, just as religions are beautiful because of the strong possibility that they are founded on nothing" (288). My stories present a haunting picture of reckless sexuality. Reckless sex is beautiful because it can open up a relationship to new and beautiful possibilities that couldn't come from being responsible. Irresponsible sexuality is beautiful precisely because it stands outside of good reason. But mainly, in my stories, the reckless sexuality turns bad.

On the one hand reckless sex is beautiful for the very reason that it disregards common sense and good judgment, but there is a dark side to reckless sex that arises in my story collection. The stories point to the consequences of reckless sex: that it can be dangerous, dominating, and can lead to difficult circumstances including unwanted pregnancies. In "No Red

at Night” a teenage girl allows an old boyfriend to fondle her even when there is no hope of a lasting relationship between them. In doing this, she allows a type of violence upon herself. The same character in “Sulfur in Water” allows a violence to herself when she lets a much older, dense, boy to have sex with her.

In the same way that John Ashbery finds that reckless art has an inherent risk, which is that it might not be art at all, there is a similar risk in reckless sex. Reckless sex has the potential for beauty to rise out of complication that wouldn't be possible in planned and purposeful sex. The dark side is that reckless sex will have no connection to love and instead be simply destructive. Unlike art, where the consequence of the risk is that the product is not deemed to be art, with sexuality the consequences are body and soul. The stakes are higher. Reckless sex is scary because it can result in vast emotional, bodily, and social risks. In my stories I wrestle with all these things, the nature of sexuality, the beauty and consequences of reckless sex.

In one of my stories, sexuality works to solidify a relationship. In “Salt Lake to Mona” two characters are in love with each other but are paralyzed by their differing insurances of where to live. In the end they engage in unprotected sex as a way of forging themselves together when they couldn't find another way.

They climbed into the sleeping bag where their skin brushed the flannel lining until they faced each other. Reed tried to run his fingers through Katie's hair, but there were too many knots. He traced the lines of her ear. He smoothed his hand across her side. Katie kissed Reed's lips.

“Katie,” Reed said. She kept kissing.

She was on him now, leading him in. There wasn't a condom.

“Don't worry,” she said.

In the collection I push for simplicity and clarity in my sentences. I want the reader to feel that the story is coming to them in a secret-like way, that they are being allowed into a hidden world and have access to inner lives that are not typically visible. Because of this, I want the language to match the simplicity of an inner life. I want the language to feel as if it is coming straight from the heart, the human soul, and unbound by difficulty.

Masaki and Elizabeth only spoke of marriage in vague, hypothetical terms, as something that might happen between two other people, just like themselves.

The house smells like cucumber scented cleaning spray.

This girl had plucked eyebrows and three hoop earrings in each ear. Her boots were big, like she intended to join the military academy.

In writing short stories, my hope is that the reader will understand more about the suffering and wonder of a human experience, and in that moment, will also understand less. In fiction “knowledge of the world tends to dissolve the solidity of the world, leading to a perception of all that is infinitely minute, light and mobile” (Calvino 8).

For Forster, the only way to claim that fiction is an art, the only real examiner of art, is the human heart. He said, “it will be the human heart, it will be this man-to-man business” which will decide what is art (38). And when all is said and done I hope that I have written and lived with a portion of Tolstoy’s love. “Love is life. All, everything I understand, I understand only because I love. Everything is, everything exists, only because I love” (775).

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Sulfur in Water

Mike's mother Judy didn't ask questions when I showed up at their house with a duffle bag in hand. She opened the door wide and let me in and understood that I would be staying for a while. Together we set up a sheet-bed on the couch in the basement. She heated up a can of soup and set a place setting at the kitchen table. Judy did all of the talking. She talked about a magazine article she was reading. Said she didn't know what to do with her hair, wanted a change, that she liked the way my hair curled on it's own. She showed me her geraniums still alive in her kitchen window even in December. And then she said there was a meeting at work tomorrow to discuss a patient that had been in the hospital for a long time, she said the people at the meeting would want the patient to die.

We sat in the front room and read magazines until Mike came home. Judy curled her bare feet under her. My magazine told all of the dishes to make with spinach. When Mike came, he filled the front door, he was that big, and was holding an icicle.

"Hey," he said to me. "What the heck are you doing here?" He was smiling.

"Raquel is just hanging out with me for a while," Judy said.

Mike stared at the scene and I saw what he saw, his mom and me in our pajamas, reading girl magazines, like we were having a sleepover party, ready to talk about how our boobs were coming in uneven, one boob bigger than the other. Judy followed Mike into the kitchen and I heard her tell him that he was going to have to sleep on the floor in her bedroom. And he said, "Gee Mom. Don't worry. She's just a kid."

I was fifteen. Mike was seventeen.

Then they were onto something new. Judy said to Mike, "Do you want me to put your icicle in a Ziploc bag and in the freezer?"

And he said, "Yeah, I want to save it."

I stayed in the front room and stared at the magazine, but I didn't read it. Judy was setting up another bed but this time on her floor. There was banging around downstairs and Mike appeared carrying a pile of clothes, a shaver, and deodorant from his basement bedroom and moved into his mom's master suite. When Mike came back through the front room he said, "The Cokes in the fridge are mine."

I had to sit on Mike's lap on the way home from a spook alley on Halloween. That's how I knew to come to their house. A bunch of teenage bodies piled into Sid's car and since I was the small one they said I had to sit on Mike's lap. Mike and Sid made jokes that I didn't understand. Mike held on to my waist like he would fall out of the car if he didn't. When the car stopped at Mike's, his mom was waiting on the porch. I had to get out of the car first, so that Mike could get his big legs out. Judy told me I was exquisite.

"I love your green eyes and your curly dark hair."

Mike looked at Judy like he wouldn't have thought to call me pretty much less exquisite.

"You should stay away from Mike and his friends." Judy said. She said it as a warning to Mike as much as for me.

"We never do anything wrong." Sid said from the car.

"Like hell you don't," said Judy.

Mom was drunk tonight when I left, yelling slut and smashing nail polish bottles like the pink, purple, and blue colored bottles were hard evidence that I had been out screwing boys. When mom was drunk her hands always went above her head. She said I would get pregnant and then she would have to take care of two little sluts.

Usually I just took it even though I had never so much as kissed a boy unless you count playground kisses. Judy saying I was exquisite made me think twice about whether I had to stand there soaking up mom's flare-ups. I packed a bag but then I couldn't think where to go. I had girlfriends. It was the word exquisite that made me head to Judy's house.

Judy actually tucked me into bed and said she was glad to have another girl in the house. Said Mike was making her crazy. While I was drifting to sleep I heard Judy talking on the phone. She was talking to my mom. "You both just need a break from each other...she's no problem...you could use time to yourself."

When I woke up the next morning Mike and Judy were gone. Judy to the hospital and Mike to who knows where. He was, I think, a student at my high school, a junior or maybe a senior, but I never actually saw him. There was a note stuck on the fridge in red ink. "Raquel, help yourself to anything in the kitchen. Please call your mom. See you tonight. Judy."

I opened the fridge and took one of Mike's Cokes. There were only two things that I needed to do today and that was to call my mom and stay away from my mom.

She didn't answer the first time I called. I drank Mike's Coke and then took the kitchen garbage out and called again. This time my mom answered.

"It's me," I said.

"Hi," she said.

There was a pause.

"When are you coming home?"

"I don't know."

We went on like this. Saying nothing.

"I'm not cleaning up that nail polish." I finally said.

I wanted to earn my keep at Judy's so I walked around the house looking for things to do. But the house was amazingly in order. The geraniums had been watered that morning. The soil all wet and black. The Venetian blinds had been twisted open. The kitchen sink was polished. There wasn't any dust on the wood furniture. The pillows on the couch were fluffed.

It was in Mike's room that I found the project that needed doing. His room looked like a twister had struck right in the center. I would need soap, ammonia, buckets of water. I opened the window to let out the stink. I stripped the bedding and stuck them in the wash with two scoops of Tide. I made piles on the bare bed. Dirty laundry. Garbage. Papers. It took forever just to de-junk the place. Then I worked with water. There was a piece of paper on the dresser that was stuck in a Coke spill. I wiped down the walls and vacuumed the corners, the carpet and under the bed.

The room should have been clean but it wasn't because the carpet was stained. I scrubbed the stains with a Tide-and-water paste, then with hot water, and then with white vinegar. I thought of my mom and wondered how she would get nail polish off the walls. With nail polish remover? But then what about the real paint?

When I put the bedspread back on the bed and the room was finally clean I saw that this was a little boy's room. That it had a cowboy theme. The bedspread was printed with red and blue bandanas. The lampshade was a cowboy hat. The knobs on the dresser and bedside table were brass horses. The curtains were denim with red, gingham trim. And there was a picture on the wall of a cowboy hanging on a horse and rising in the air and the word Bronco underneath.

I tried to find something else to do, like watch a movie or read a book but every couple of minutes I walked back to Mike's room to take it all in. It was genius to put everything together like that. That curtain. That bedspread. That cowboy-hat lamp.

I got in the tub. I made the water hot. I washed my hair with shampoo made for men and soap that doesn't add lotion to the mix. There was a clean towel under the sink. I dried myself off but it didn't do any good because my hair kept dripping water down my back, even after I tried to dry it. I had left my clothes in the duffle bag by the couch, which was only a few yards from the bathroom. I took a detour to look in at Mike's room again. The light was low in the sky and shining straight across the room. Even the pillows were trimmed in plaid. I sat on the bed with the towel wrapped around me. My feet were all red from the hot bath. I put my head on the plaid trimmed pillow. And I was only going to lie there for a minute but you know the story. The one with the three bears. Except that unlike me, she wasn't dumb enough to fall asleep naked.

Who knows how much later—was it hours or minutes—Mike came loafing in to grab something or other and I woke up. My towel had fallen off but it didn't occur to me at that moment to pull it up. I just lay there splayed naked. We both just stared: me at him, him at me. And then he left without taking whatever it was that he needed.

I finally had a sin I could own up to. I was naked in front of a boy. My mom had called it right. I would undress in front of a boy the first chance I got. I got dressed and walked up the stairs, through the house, down the hallway, into the Master suite, checked the bathroom. "Mike," I called. But he had gone.

When Judy came home her eyes were all red. It was the patient. He was going to die in three days. She'd been talking to his family all day. She was teaching the family to starve him.

"I don't feel like staying in tonight, do you?" Judy said.

"No." I said.

"Has Mike been around?" Judy asked.

"Yeah but he left when he saw I was still here." Was that a lie?

“Your mom must have left this on the porch.” Judy handed me the shoebox. Inside was a little stuffed penguin with a Snickers Bar and a note that said, “Come back soon. Love Mom.”

Judy and I went to Hire’s for hamburgers. The place was filled with every generation: old couples with grey hair taking small bites and chewing carefully; families with small kids, begging the little kids to finish their hot dog, to please eat their fries. And there were teenagers who behaved like they owned the place. Rocking back and forth on the chairs, making art with French fries and milk shakes. Judy ordered for me, saying that too-skinny teenagers don’t get to pick out their meals. She ordered me a hamburger, onion rings, fry sauce and a cherry Coke. I knew one girl working the tables. She used to be skinny, but now she was closer to fat. That’s what happens when you work in a diner every night.

I ate the hamburger and the onion rings, and when the onion rings were gone, I dipped my straw into the fry sauce and licked the straw. I saved my drink for last.

Judy had ordered a side salad and a bowl of chili.

When Mike walked in he was with a date. This girl had plucked eyebrows and three hoop earrings in each ear. Her boots were big, like she intended to join the military academy. Mike and his date walked right up to us and sat down. Mike sat next to me, and Angie sat next to Judy.

“This is great,” Mike said. “Now we can get Mom to pay for dinner.”

He winked at me and I wasn’t sure if it was because he was going to get dinner free or because he’d found me naked on his bed. I hoped it wasn’t that he’d found me naked on his bed.

He called to the fat waitress. He ordered the same thing as me except with two orders of fry sauce. Angie ordered a salad and a diet coke. She chipped nail polish off of her fingernails and right onto the table so there was a pile of red dust forming.

Mike's left leg kept shaking fast and every few seconds or so his leg pounded hard against mine. But he never stopped, just kept banging it back and forth.

"Ask me about my day," Judy said.

"Ah Mom. Save the blood and gut report for after dinner."

"I'm going to tell you about my day," she said. "I had to instruct a family to starve a dying man to death." Judy was shaking slightly. I looked to see if Mike noticed but he didn't.

Angie looked up from her nails, "I thought hospitals save people's lives."

"They don't." Judy was still shaking.

Angie turned her head away.

"Gosh Mom. Go to a spa or something."

I chewed on some ice.

Judy looked at me. Eye to eye for several moments, like I was the only smart one in the bunch, that too bad for us we had to exist with idiots. "Are you ready to head home? Leave these two to their date?"

"Yeah," I said and grabbed my sweater.

"Wait. Don't go," Mike said.

I knew what he wanted and that was for Judy to pay his hamburger bill. "Okay, Okay. Tell me about this dead guy."

"He's not dead yet." Judy said. Judy told us about her patient. Said she had loved him for three straight weeks. That he was brilliant. That he knew all about the Renaissance. How the Bible came to be.

Angie and Mike's food came. And they started eating.

Mike's mouth was full of hamburger when he interrupted Judy, "Mom. Did you know that Raquel cleaned my room today?"

"You didn't," she said to me.

I nodded yes.

"You could have gotten a disease," she said.

Angie was slurping her Diet Coke.

"How tired were you when you were done?" Mike said banging his knee against mine.

"It took a long time." I said.

"I'm surprised it didn't take you weeks. I was going to dedicate my entire Christmas break to cleaning that room," Judy said.

I hoped that Mike would shut up.

"You know where you would fit in?" he asked me.

I didn't.

"You would fit right in at our very own Spanish Fork hot pots."

I got the reference.

"Yes." Judy said. She didn't get the reference. "There is nothing like hot springs after a day of hard work. Is that where you and Angie are heading?"

"It wasn't on the agenda but we could manage to take Raquel up there, couldn't we Angie?"

Angie was fussing with her hair elastic.

"Whatever," she said.

"That would be a nice thing to go do. Do you all have swimsuits? Or at least shorts and t-shirts?"

I understood that Judy couldn't deal with her doofus Son tonight. And then I understood that she couldn't deal with me either. It was my eyes that knew too much. Saw things for what they are.

In Mike's car Angie said she didn't want to go to the hot pots. That the salad had made her feel sick and the smell of egg at the hot pots would make her feel worse. We dropped her off at a duplex that had mismatched front doors. At Judy's house I grabbed everything I had brought. I stuffed my duffel bag with my pajamas and brush and toothpaste and dirty clothes, because I knew when I got done doing what I would do at the hot pots, I could go home.

Mike drove fast up Spanish Fork Canyon and pulled off at Three Forks parking lot. I had on jeans, a sweatshirt, and old tennis shoes. There was snow and mud on the trail. I tried to hike along the side of the path, where the snow was still thick, instead of the center where there was mud. Other hikers had been on the trail recently, there were footprints marking the way.

Mike said, "You a Freshman?"

"Yeah. What are you?" I asked.

"I am a Senior. But I'm not at school much. I work at Albertson's for work study."

My feet were getting wet. I tucked my fingers into the arms of my sweatshirt and pulled my hood around my head. Mike kept behind me. I could smell the hot pots getting closer. Sulfur like egg.

The moon was out, but it was still dark in the trees.

There was steam and fog coming out of the hot pots. Making the air warm and murky. I could tell which of the three different pools were the hottest by the thickness of the steam rising out of it. The pool with the least fog rising had a trickle of water coming in from a river.

Mike took his clothes off in front of me. Now we were even. He was tall, well over six feet, and big. His skin was white against the dark night. He slipped into one of the hot pots and looked at me. I knew what the expectation was. I knew it when we were still at Hire's, when I had time to get away. I didn't even make an excuse.

No one else was at the hot pots, because it was winter and the middle of the week.

There was no place for me to go except into the water or back to the car. Both scenes played out badly in my head.

There was a thick green moss growing around the hot pots. Mike put his head under the water and came out. His skin started to look pink.

My mother had said I would screw a boy the first chance I got and here I was. But this didn't seem at all like the scene I imagined she was referring to. I unlaced my shoes and put them on a wet rock, then my sweatshirt, my pants, then everything.

Mike watched and smiled.

I was clumsy getting in, trying to find a steady place for my feet, but there wasn't one, everywhere there was moss.

Finally I just sat right on the moss and slid in. The water was clear as crystal and the moonlight reflected off its water. Mike had picked the hottest pool. I was too warm, I wanted to get out, my breath got heavy.

The haze surrounded us. Mike's hands were on me now. We moved from pool, to mud, to rock. Our legs intertwined. His hands pushed into me, mine into him. The kissing hurt. My head hung off a rock. There was pain but it was good.

I wanted more but it was over.

When I got home my mom wasn't there. She had cleaned the house, and made my bed, and the alcohol was gone from the fridge. Even the Listerine was gone. I took off my clothes that were covered with mud and melted snow and my underwear was filled with blood. I didn't try to hide it, just put the pile on my floor and climbed into bed, still dirty. There was no point fighting now.

Libby

I'm reading Hamlet when Libby calls, "I want you to sleep over tonight." Libby explains that Dave is gone for the night, that he needs to think things over, and she and the girls will be home alone.

"Of course I'll come," I say.

Libby's husband has been caught having an affair.

"Are you worried about where he is going tonight?" I ask.

"It doesn't matter, the damage is already done."

I see my husband Kevin's beat up car pull up the driveway and realize that I wanted to be home with him tonight and finish reading Hamlet.

"Do you want me to bring dinner?" I ask Libby.

"No, I can't stomach more than Cream Of Wheat right now."

Kevin comes into the kitchen and waves. I roll my eyes at him gesturing towards the phone and he smiles. Kevin empties his pockets onto the kitchen counter. There are three crumpled receipts, a business card, thirteen dollars, four different guitar picks, each a different color depending on the weight, and 2 loose keys; one for the house, one for the car.

"I'll be there at ten," I say.

"What's up with Libby?" Kevin asks.

"Dave is going to think for the night."

"No way. So now he can just screw his ho girl anytime he wants? He just has to say he is confused, needs to think. Jesus."

I nod.

I bring my own blanket because I don't want to sleep in the same sheets that Dave sleeps in. The house smells like cucumber scented cleaning spray. It is after ten o'clock and Libby is cleaning her kitchen frantically. The ceiling light fixtures are soaking in hot suds in the sink, all of the Campbell's soup cans are on the floor. Libby is unscrewing the switch covers. She points to the cans and says, "They need to be dusted," and throws me a wet rag. Our mom is a clean freak too, but Libby has taken cleanliness to a whole new level.

"Did you have a hard time getting the girls to bed?" I ask.

"Eliza went to sleep at 8:00, and I just finished nursing Cora."

I start wiping down the soup cans: Cream of Celery, Tomato, Chicken Gumbo. I was supposed to read the fourth and fifth act of Hamlet tonight and hoped that Libby's house would be settled enough that I could. I tell myself that everybody in Hamlet dies anyway and ask Libby if she is getting tired.

"No, I was, but now I'm just trying to keep my mind occupied."

"So cleaning makes you feel safe?" I say.

This irritates her, "Just put the soup cans back so that the label is facing out."

"Okay."

By twelve we have cleaned out the refrigerator, the oven, all the small appliances, and Libby is about to pull the pans out of the cupboard to wash beneath those.

"Libby. We have to stop. Cora and Eliza need a mom tomorrow."

We sit on the couch and watch a chick flick. We smother our hands with lotion so that our skin will forgive us for immersing them in chemicals. I put my head on Libby's lap. She gets a brush and braids my hair. We take off the bras underneath our t-shirts and throw them on the

floor. When the guy gets the girl and the movie is over Libby cries...big heaves and tons of tears. I hold her feet. We sleep on the couch.

Next day Kevin calls to say hi before he goes to work.

“When are you coming home?”

“I don’t know. I was going to leave here pretty quick but Libby’s still asleep. She doesn’t seem well. I don’t know if I should wait.”

“Okay. Call me and let me know.”

He is annoyed.

I hear Cora crying in her crib and go to her. She is just barely old enough to hitch on my hip. I kiss both of her cheeks and look through her clothes. Cora’s eyes are glued to my face. “How are you, my little dimpled darling?” I change her diaper, put her in a summer layette and rock her in the chair. The chair reminds her of mama milk and she starts to fuss. Libby stumbles into the nursery, takes over the rocker and lifts up her shirt, she handles her own breast and places it in Cora’s mouth. Unlike Eliza who wiggled and fussed and took forever to nurse, Cora gets to business taking in big gulps and sometimes sputters when the milk sprays too strong. Libby is always gorgeous, but in the morning she is especially pretty. Her lips are puffy from sleep and her cheeks are flushed.

While Libby gets her girls ready for the day I go into her bedroom and read Hamlet, and all I can think of is the futility of trying to make things right. I hear Libby in the kitchen and decide to help her.

She tells me to go out to the garage to get some jam out of the deep freezer. Libby has been telling me how I can help since I could walk. In the garage there is a metal shelf stuffed

with Libby and Dave's camping gear. There are two sleeping bags, a tent, a cooler, a bin full of a tarp and flashlights, a hammer, and ponchos.

This was how Dave got caught. He didn't take camping supplies on his campout. And went on a Wednesday. I had been sent out to the freezer that time too, for frozen corn, and when I came back in Libby was at the stove.

"Where was Dave going camping?"

"Payson Lakes."

It didn't make sense. If Dave was going guy camping he wouldn't go to a place where there are running toilets and covered tables. Payson Lakes is the kind of place you take your wife and kids with you. If he were camping with guys he'd have gone to the wind rivers or the narrows.

"He didn't take any camping gear?" I asked.

"What?"

"Come look," I said.

We stood in front of the shelves in the garage where nothing was missing.

Libby checked the credit cards, she knew all of his passwords, and found a booking to Hotel Monaco downtown.

I come back in the house with the Jam.

Libby is whipping cream in her kitchen aid appliance while holding Cora. Eliza and I start dipping French bread in an egg and milk mixture and toss them onto the frying pan. Libby, who has looked eighteen for years suddenly looks her age. Thirty.

"When do you have class?" Libby asks.

“I have to leave in about an hour if I want to shower and wear clean clothes to school.

Dave is coming back tonight, right?”

“That’s the plan.”

When Libby was a teenager she liked to put on sweats and walk for miles. She would walk five miles at a time. But mom and dad got too nervous having her out alone like that, she was such a beauty with her long dark hair, face that had no need for makeup and legs that went on forever. They finally convinced her to go to the recreation center to walk, which is where she met Dave. He was a couple years older than Libby and was often there lifting and doing speed runs around the track. He asked her to dinner, kissed her, and ever since then Libby was whopped. She adored Dave. We all did.

I fill a sippy cup for Eliza and hold Cora so that Libby can eat in peace. She eats fast, like she will run out of time. Then we trade Cora and I eat.

When I leave I kiss both Cora and Libby on the cheek. My house is forty minutes away. I live close to the university in a small 40’s house and Libby lives at the mouth of the canyon in a neighborhood with big new houses that look like they belong on the French Riviera.

I skip my shower and drive to Mom and Dad’s house. I walk through the garage entrance and into the house.

“Libby is not well. She is either frantically cleaning or she is lethargic. I can’t believe Dave cheated on her.”

“They all do,” my mom said.

“What? Dad has never cheated on you.”

“Yeah, but he always wanted to.”

“Yeah, but he didn’t. There’s a difference.”

“I guess so.”

“You’re not outraged by Dave?” I say.

“Yes, but what good does that do Libby. She may decide to stick it out with him, and it will be even worse if we all hate him.”

“Wait. So when did you guess that Dave was having an affair?”

“I guessed something was up with all those flowers, silk scarves and expensive purses he has been buying her lately. It doesn’t occur to an honest man to give flowers. Two babies puts a lot of pressure on a marriage.”

“Mother. Kevin just bought me flowers last week.”

“Awe. Don’t worry about him. He’s too stupid to have an affair.”

“He has a Ph.D!”

“I know. My point exactly, he’s stupid.” Mom smiles.

I sit at a stool on the counter.

“So what should we do, should we tell her to come live here with you?” I say.

“Nah. Let Libby work through this on her own terms. She knows she can always come here. I’m going to get Eliza today and take her to McDonalds.”

“Where’s Dad?”

“He’s downstairs making a rocking horse for Eliza.”

“I’ve got to go to class.”

“You are going to wear that to school?”

“Yes mom.”

Hamlet is dull as dirt.

When Kevin comes home he starts making fancy sandwiches for dinner where you rub the bread with a butter, parmesan, and pepper-flake mixture before grilling them in the pan. While the sandwiches turn golden, he cuts up apples and rinses grapes. He has been making dinner ever since I went back to school.

“So did you find out where Dave really went last night?”

“No.” I say. I tell him about cleaning the light fixtures and Libby sobbing over a chick flick and my mom going to a McDonalds Playland and the rocking horse. It all adds up to a life in crisis. And then I see it on Kevin’s face. What my mom was talking about. Every man wants to have an affair. Kevin is thinking how the heck did Dave pull it off? And I see Kevin’s stupidity too. He could never think far enough ahead—like a game of chess—to actually woo, sleep with, and cover up an affair. So now I’m supposed to be glad that he’s stupid.

“Does Libby know what she is going to do yet?” Kevin asks.

“No. Mom says Libby needs to make a decision on her own terms.”

“I was supposed to hike Kings Peak with Dave on Saturday morning. Poor Libby.”

“When she decides to confront him the shit will hit the ceiling.”

“Wow,” he says.

“I know it.”

I call Libby.

“How did your day go?”

“Good. Mom took Eliza out to lunch and I got the insides of the cupboards cleaned. Tomorrow I’m going to tackle the window screens.”

“What time did Dave get home?”

“He just got home an hour ago.”

There is a pause.

“What are you two going to do tonight?”

“I hadn’t even thought about that. I’m just glad that someone is putting the girls to bed besides me.”

“You should have a bath then.”

“I’m trying to let my hands heal from all the cleaning I’ve done the last little bit. I don’t think putting them in water will be good.”

“So you’re okay then?”

There is another pause.

“Yeah. I’m okay.”

I wonder if Dave will try to sleep with her tonight and if so, will Libby say yes.

There is nothing to do now but wait. And it’s clear that the wait is going to be painful for everyone.

Kevin and I hike the city creek trail early on Saturday morning. The moon is still visible in the blue sky. The serious runners are out getting their miles done for the day. Kevin’s hair is a little overgrown, and this length reminds me of how he looked on our first trip together. We had gone to San Francisco before San Francisco turned ghetto and walked for hours. We were walking down a crowded street when a pigeon flew right towards my head. I yelped and ducked. Then Kevin and I laughed about the pigeon for the rest of the day and our laughter equaled love.

“I can’t believe that Dave is such an idiot. A woman like Libby does not come around everyday. I can’t believe he is risking that.” Kevin says.

I'm silent for a while. The trees make a canopy above the trail and I feel peaceful—even though for a split second I wonder if I'm a woman like Libby. But I decide not to let my mind work it over. Isn't it possible that Kevin meant it in the best possible way? That I am his everything?

"I just always thought that Dave adored Libby," I say.

Now Kevin is unresponsive. The streambed is far down on the right side of the trail. The winter run-off is mainly gone and the water is just a trickle.

Conversation is useless this morning.

"What do you have to do today?" Kevin asks.

"I have to read Othello and write a couple papers and I need to call Libby."

Sunday morning I go to Libby's. The oven and fridge have been pulled out into the kitchen. Libby is working with a bucket of water and a scouring brush. I follow her lead, grabbing a spray bottle and a sponge. We clean grease marks from cooking spills and wipe up dust piles. A bunch of magnetic letters have fallen under the fridge. I pick them up and put them in the sink.

"What else is on the kitchen cleaning list?" I ask.

"The ceiling moldings," Libby says. "And the tops of the kitchen counters need to be bleached."

"Okay."

Dave has taken the girls to the park down the street. I haven't seen him since the news broke.

The cuticles on Libby's hands are ripped and bleeding, the skin on her knuckles have broken open. Her hands are dry.

"Libby your hands," I say.

"I know. They are bad." She dumps more Ajax onto the floor.

"No Libby, they are really bad."

I pull her up off the floor and bring her to the sink to rinse off her hands in cold water. Her face scrunches when the cold water stings.

"Sit down on the stool," I say. And for once she listens, I am the older sister now. I go to the pantry and pull out the Crisco, our mother's remedy for healing hands after a day of hard cleaning. I sit on the stool next to Libby and take her left hand and rub Crisco deep into her skin, over the cracks and into her knuckles. Same thing to the right hand.

I set the stove alarm for ten minutes and repeat with a second layer.

Libby knows what is next. She knows mom's treatment. I take Libby into the Master bedroom and open the dresser drawers until I find a pair of Dave's socks. I put them over her hands, pull the bed covers down, and put Libby in the bed.

I go back to the kitchen and clean the walls behind the fridge and oven and wipe down the appliances. Then I push them back into place.

When Dave comes home I tell him that he needs to wipe down the mouldings and the tops of the cabinets because Libby needs to let her hands rest.

He nods.

Cora fusses so I take her into the Master bedroom and give her to Libby, who is not yet asleep.

"She needs her mama," I say.

Libby's hands were covered with socks.

"Will you open my bra?"

I unhook the clasp and help her take it all off. Cora settled into her mom.

"I'm going to put a movie on for Eliza."

"Okay."

"Call me."

"Okay."

When I leave I hear Cora guzzling.

No Red at Night

I tripped two times while walking down Hudson Street. The first time I caught myself, the second time I didn't. I was getting clumsy like that, dropping my stuff all over the street. I only picked up half of it. I would have Brittany come back for the rest, or I'd have to steal it again. Brittany liked having me snatch our stuff because I was more pregnant than she was and so Jeremy the night clerk wouldn't come after me. She was right about Jeremy, but it was Brittany's turn. My belly made it hard to squat because I'd start to fall forward, so I'd lean back, but then I'd start to fall backward. I put the orange juice and the cigarettes back in my bag. That night there was no color. The dark had pushed color through a sieve and held it trapped. The stars were the pulp that was left.

The cigarettes were why I had gone to the store in the first place and the orange juice was to balance the damage of the cigarettes. This nutrition lady came to the high school to get Brittany and I to stop smoking, but when we couldn't give it up she said that we could keep our cigarettes if we drank orange juice and ate less snickers bars.

This evening we had driven around rich neighborhood's in Brittany's 2-door beige Hyundai looking for discarded stuff. We hoped to find a highchair or a changing table but instead we found a seven foot iron tree that was set against a dumpster. The dumpster was behind a row of boutiques. The iron tree was once painted green but now mainly rust colored. We had shoved the tree in the backseat of the Hyundai, it took my headspace and went out my window. Brittany kept driving around looking for stuff, I told her it didn't matter, that even if we did find something we didn't have room for it in the car. When we didn't find anything else we ended up at Albertson's.

I got in the car with the cigarettes and the orange juice and sat on the floor so that the metal tree limbs didn't puncture my head. Brittany wasn't fat yet, she didn't understand why it took so long for me to sit on the floor.

"Did you get the granola or the spaghetti noodles?" Brittany wore her hair in a high ponytail so she looked thirteen instead of sixteen.

"Yeah I got 'em but now they're on the sidewalk," I said.

"Shit. Mama." She got out of the car and slammed the door and in a couple minutes she came back with the noodles, the canned kidney beans, the granola and the chocolate milk.

Brittany put the groceries on the dash. "I swear to god I wouldn't put up with this if we weren't family now."

Brittany wasn't my first choice for family either. Before we both ended up in the same predicament, she had been one of those girls that actually go to the high school games and when she was there she would actually cheer for the team. But now we were both pregnant, four months apart, and our babies, we had found out, were going to be brothers.

I wanted to go home. Brittany and I had an apartment that sat on top of a garage. When my mom and my relationship went sour, I went to my Dad's, but he didn't like me being at his house, so he said I could live in the over-the-garage apartment that sat above his rental. A young couple lived in the main part of the house. Brittany and I had been setting up house for our babies. We had a dresser now so we were deciding how to organize the drawers. Should the bottom three drawers be for my baby and the top three drawers for her baby? Or should we organize the clothes by size and put the 0-3 month baby clothes in the top drawer and add a size up for each lower drawer making the bottom drawer for two year olds? This was the task we had decided to work on but we apparently were not heading home because Brittany drove over the

railroad and toward the lake. I was curled up so tight that I was squishing my baby and my bladder.

“Where we going Brit?” I asked.

“We need to get some stuffed animals.”

“I need to pee,” I said.

Brittany turned right at the old yellow gas station. She was heading to Sid’s house. My head hit against the emergency brake. Brittany kept trying to find ways to make Sid pay, pay for what he did to both of us. I wanted to tell her that it was us that would have to pay, just us. But we would head to Sid’s house anyway for a pathetic attempt at revenge. Brittany drove like the police were inches behind us. I knew nobody was coming after us. Jeremy, from Albertson’s, practically opened the door for me when I left with the store’s groceries. He became really busy with his feather duster and left the key to the cigarettes on top of the glass container.

Sid’s house was a split-level that somebody threw up in the eighties. That was the last thing anybody did for the house. The front lawn was more dirt than grass. The screen door was connected with one hinge. We walked into the house where Sid was on the couch eating a can of fruit cocktail with his fingers. He didn’t move when we walked in. Big Mike, who I hadn’t seen in forever, was lying on the floor and staring at the ceiling. There were empty beer cans on the floor. Sid’s mom worked nights at the hospital.

Brittany walked to Sid’s bedroom. I stood in the front doorway.

“Since when were you knocked up?” Mike asked. Even from the floor he looked straight at my eyes.

“Eight months,” I said. I still had to pee.

“Oh my God. You’re having my baby. That night, at the hot springs! Holy Shit. Why didn’t you tell me?” He was standing now and ready to touch my stomach.

“It’s not your baby Mike.”

“How do you know? Shouldn’t we go get one of those tests?”

I don’t know how to explain to an idiot that if it was his baby, the baby would be crawling by now. There is simple math.

“If you want we can get one of those tests.” I said.

Sid drank the syrup out of the fruit cocktail can and said, “You never told me the baby could be someone else’s.”

I wanted to say that it couldn’t be anyone else’s, that Sid was the only one. He had kissed my stomach when I told him, my hands ran through his curly hair. He said *Can we keep it*. If I cried I don’t remember. He said he would come to my birthing classes.

Now I said, “Do you want to take a test?”

Sid shook his head. His hair was messy. He knew he didn’t need a test. I had kissed his neck, sucked his chin. I had pushed his hipbones back until it didn’t hurt.

Brittany stomped through the living room to the kitchen and grabbed a garbage sack and then went back to Sid’s bedroom.

“She already took my dresser,” Sid said to me.

I shrugged and went outside to pee. The spring had cleaned up the air, sucked up Utah’s inversion with its budding trees. The tree exchanged a too generous amount of oxygen for carbon dioxide. I could smell it in the air. I squatted under a pine tree and then I started to smoke.

Sid came outside and smoked with me.

“What’s Brittany doing?” Sid asked.

“Looking for stuffed animals.”

Mike came outside and said, “I have a right to know if it’s my baby.” Mike was always slow on the uptake.

Sid and I kept smoking. This infuriated Mike, our smoking. We were done with escalations. We were over hype. Mike grabbed the screen door and ripped it from the hinge. Sid and I stared.

“I know what to do if you’re pregnant and it’s mine.” The light from the street lamp shone on Mike, he was the star of his own flick.

Sid stood in front of me.

“You want to marry me Mike? We’ll build a house together?” Mike couldn’t even grow facial hair yet.

Brittany came out of the house with a garbage sack full of stuffed animals and a carton of eggs.

“Our nutritionist said to eat eggs.” She saw Mike with the door over his head and got in his face, “What the fuck is going on out here?” Brittany hadn’t internalized her baby yet. She would still get in fights like her uterus was not filled with human life.

Mike slammed the screen door over Brittany’s head popping the aluminum square. The eggs came down. They stayed in the carton but we all heard them crack. Then Mike had Brittany’s arm, twisting it, Indian burn. “I’ll tell you what is going on out here. Somebody’s not telling me the truth.”

“You fuck brother!” He still had her arm and pressed his pelvis into her back.

“Get in the car Raquel.” Brittany yelled to me. To Mike she said, “What do you want to know pussy breath?”

“You tell me who is the father of Raquel’s baby.”

“It’s Sid you idiot.”

I couldn’t get in the car because of the tree.

Mike was genuinely surprised, “Sid!” He dropped Brittany’s arm and started to laugh.

“Holy! Man!” He sat down now, on the step, breathing.

No one mentioned that Brittany was also having Sid’s baby.

From the car I called, “What would you do Mike, if I was having your baby?”

“I would kill it.”

Sid drove me home because he could see that I might get my head punctured by the tree.

We drove to the lake first and got out. We stood against the car and he kissed me and undid my pants and put his hand down the front of them. I kissed him back because I knew he would never forgive himself, not for getting me pregnant and not for getting Brittany pregnant and not for losing me.

At home Brittany wanted help hauling the tree up the stairs to our apartment. She didn’t even flinch when the tree scraped right through the drywall in the stairwell going up to our door. I liked our little home. We would let the babies have the bedroom and Brittany and I would sleep in the living room. I had been doing little projects around the house. The kitchen cupboards were all missing the doors so I took the hinges off and painted the cabinets light green and lined them with cherry kitchen drawer liner. I tacked lace onto each shelf. There was no door to the bedroom, so at school Brittany and I sewed a curtain out of an old sheet that was covered with baby elephants. I sewed ribbon along the edges.

Brittany went back down to the car and got the bag of stuffed animals. They were the worst stuffed animals I'd ever seen in my life. Their eyes had been sucked off and batting hung out of the arms. Brittany searched for string. I poured two glasses of orange juice.

"I didn't know you had a thing with Mike." Brittany said.

"Just that once, at the hot springs."

I decide to tell her more because we were family now. We were the mom's of brothers. "Mike was my first." I said.

Brittany nodded. She did not need to tell me who was her first. We both knew that there was only one, and it was only once, and it was Sid. Brittany stood in the kitchen searching for string in drawers, her ponytail hung to the small of her back, the color of her hair was the same light brown that I imagined she was born with.

And I suddenly knew that her baby was mine, too. I felt responsible. She had heard from Lanny that I was pregnant, so she whispered to me first about missing blood. She said she imagined her baby with Sid's curly hair and her brown eyes. I didn't have to tell her. I could have walked grace, sang forgiveness, been love. It was in my power. I could have said nothing—the kindest lie. Sid and Brittany could have walked free. Brittany would have done it for me.

"I'm so sorry." I said to Brittany.

She nodded again.

We drank the orange juice.

Brittany found a roll of floss in the bathroom. We set the iron tree in the corner of the baby's room and began stringing the stuffed animals to the tree. I started with a monkey whose fur had an old yogurt spill crusted to its back. The only way to hang the stuffed animals was to string the floss around their necks. I watched Brittany to make sure that that's how she would

hang them up. She wrapped the floss around the neck three times, measured how far the animal should hang down and then tied it to a metal branch. When we were done the tree was covered with over twenty stuffed animals that hung by their necks and were missing their eyes and their tails.

We set our sleeping bags across the living room floor. The house was so black that even Brittany's red lips didn't have color. It was like we lived in a black and white movie but we only had shades of dark grey and black. Brittany lifted up my shirt and felt my stomach until the baby moved. The baby moved for a long time. Brittany's hand followed the baby's limbs that stuck out the furthest. The doctor said that the baby would move to the downward position anytime. I moved my hand to Brittany's stomach, which was barely showing with her clothes on, but skin on skin my hand could feel the expansion and I knew there was a baby inside.

"Have you felt the baby move yet?" I asked.

"Just this week." She said.

We took turns getting up to use the bathroom. The moon never rose.

Northern Flicker

It was a June that felt like March. The clouds clung to the sky, and seemed only to move in circles above the Salt Lake Valley. It would rain and a mist would form, light enough to think that the clouds could move on east with the air from a whistle, but the clouds just stayed and got thicker and rained again. Everything was green and desert had no grip on the land.

Elizabeth spent the morning writing her thesis. Her thesis—a look at the ecosystem of City Creek Canyon—wasn't coming together. She sat at her desk scribbling thoughts onto a yellow legal pad. She got up out of her chair and twisted her hands together and walked in circles around the coffee table. She sipped a drink of water from a half-pint mason jar on her desk. She walked again, her hands twisting. She wasn't thinking about the canyon. She thought of Masaki. She rounded the coffee table more times and then sat down at her desk. She sat because she understood what she felt.

Elizabeth now got back to work. She called advisors, read an article and wrote three pages. Elizabeth enjoyed this work and liked the time spent at her desk working with paper, taking notes into her black leather book, marking important passages with a color-coding system that only she understood. She wrote about the Northern Flicker, how its favorite food is ants, and uses its long tongue to lap them up.

At lunch time the vigor of Elizabeth's mind diminished and she found herself looking out the rain-streaked window onto the wet Albertson's parking lot. She watched people enter and exit the store, hopping over puddles and using newspaper for umbrellas.

The rain had mainly been the calm sort that one only hears as a hum. Elizabeth kept thinking she could get away without a rain jacket, when she walked to the library in the afternoons or to the sandwich shop around the corner, but of course she would end up wet.

Yesterday afternoon the rain, which up until then had felt like a spa treatment, turned to hail and pounded shooter sized ice on the windows and trees and cars. This lasted for twenty minutes and luckily Elizabeth had been in her apartment so that she could bring in the potted diascia that sat on her private deck. Some of the flowers had already been smashed. Elizabeth didn't notice that when she pulled the pot into her apartment she had brought leaves and dirt onto the floor.

Masaki, who came in the evenings, had used a bottle of all-purpose spray to wipe the soil off the wood floors. He picked up the dried leaves that were crushed and spread across the planks. The evening news reported that the day's hail had caused damage to fruit and hay.

"You should take your shoes off, before you come inside, so that a mess like this does not happen," Masaki said.

"But I didn't have time to think. There was that hail and my diascia were being beaten."

Elizabeth could see that her answer was insufficient. It had been hours since the hailstorm and she had ignored the mess on the floor so that she could take a hot bath.

There was always some little mess that Masaki took care of when he came to her apartment before settling down to use Elizabeth's computer. Most often the mess involved the dishes in her sink or Elizabeth's sloppy refrigerator.

Trust me. Elizabeth would say. A Japanese man does not want an American wife.

But what if they love each other and are very happy together?

Happiness has nothing to do with it. She will leave her dishes in the sink overnight and let her cats sleep on her pillow.

That's unacceptable. And disgusting.

I know. That's why he should find a Japanese wife.

Masaki and Elizabeth only spoke of marriage in vague, hypothetical terms, as something that might happen between two other people, just like themselves.

On Thursday Elizabeth met with Mabel Dillon, her advisor, for lunch. Mabel was already at a table when Elizabeth got to the sandwich shop. She wore a tan pencil skirt and a ruffled blouse, her jacket laid across the back of her chair. Her hair was blonde and grey and cut in a messy bob, her hair fluttered around her face. She wiped a small drop of water off her lower lip and onto a paper napkin and turned the page of her newspaper.

Elizabeth handed Mabel a folder with the second chapter of her thesis. Mabel read the chapter while Elizabeth stood in line to order two turkey and avocado sandwiches, one with mayonnaise one without.

“This section is coming along,” said Mabel.

“It is?”

“Yes,” she smiled. “But I feel that you have to address the Maple’s double samara. You spent so much time in the first Chapter talking about the bird’s relationship to that tree, but you don’t mention the tree at all in the section about the Northern Flicker. Does the Northern Flicker eat the seed in the double samara like other birds? And if they don’t, then why?”

“I wanted to be done with field work,” Elizabeth said.

“I’ll go with you. Name the day. We’ll go early and pack food.”

Masaki had lived in America for three years, he had finished taking all of his nursing prerequisites and was now applying to nursing schools. His only problem was that he couldn’t pass the English language test. He had paid the one hundred and fifty dollar fee to take the test

three times and still hadn't passed. Elizabeth agreed to help him and gave him assignments to do during the day—writing assignments. Read this article from *Time Magazine*. She would say. Write two hundred and fifty words explaining what the article says and two hundred and fifty words explaining your own opinion of the article.

After they had eaten dinner and Masaki had read his Japanese newspaper on Elizabeth's computer, they would sit at the small kitchen table and have what they called English learning conversations. Elizabeth would choose the topics. Childbirth. Religion. Food. Politics. Elizabeth would take notes of vocabulary that Masaki ought to be using and wasn't.

"How was your reading today?" Elizabeth had given him an article on American's schools.

"It was good."

"Where is your paper?"

"Ah. I couldn't bring it. You know. I didn't finish it in time to use the lab's printer."

"Okay then. Bring it tomorrow."

Masaki brought water to the table.

The lights were off except for a small lamp hanging from the ceiling. Masaki pushed his glasses higher onto his nose and folded his arms across the table. They stacked their bare feet on top of one another's.

"We are going to talk about birds today."

"Okay. I don't think I will need to talk about birds on the test, but okay."

"Tell me what you know about birds."

Elizabeth twisted her hair to one side. She had worn her hair in the same way since she was a child. Parted down the middle with separate pieces of long blonde hair making a frame around her small face and high cheeks. When she put on make-up, which she rarely did, she wore pinks. She had never thought of herself as large until she came together with Masaki. Now she felt the words rotund, or husky could be used to describe her. Masaki was five feet four inches and had told her he weighed one hundred and ten pounds. Elizabeth weighed twenty pounds more than Masaki. When they kissed, before he went home for the night, Elizabeth had to bend down to reach his lips.

Masaki was skinnier than usual, he had explained. He had been sick since coming to America with what the doctors called irritable bowel syndrome. He was quick to throw up, and would go days with out being able to eat more than dry toast and tea. Elizabeth had seen this first hand, he had often not been able to eat his dinner, even when it was plain noodles, or clear soup. The doctor's prescription—less stress.

“Birds are born. They crack out of eggs. You know. They fly in the trees and make nests. They eat...oh, you know...they eat...the things that come out of the ground.”

Elizabeth wrote “worms” onto her paper small enough that Masaki could not read.

“They travel a long time in autumn to go where it is warm.”

Elizabeth wrote, “migrate” onto her paper and “distance”.

“Some live on the beach. And some live in the forests. Or the Desert.”

“What are the names of some desert birds?” Elizabeth asked.

“I know there is the raven. And hawks.”

“How are hawks different from other birds?”

“They hunt for food.”

“Good. Have you ever heard of a northern flicker?”

“No.”

“Okay. That will be tomorrow’s assignment. I will have you read an article about birds in the Salt Lake valley.”

“I don’t think that is a good idea.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Well what do you want to learn about?”

“I don’t know. Maybe Science.”

“Masaki. Birds are science. And the subject doesn’t matter. What matters is that you are reading, writing and speaking about topics unfamiliar to you.”

“But birds?”

“I will go and print the article for you.” She suspected that he would not do the assignment, he hadn’t brought back any writing for a week.

Elizabeth baffled at the way Masaki thought that learning a language was like learning a science. That she could simply explain and he would understand. They had been working on his language skills for six weeks and Elizabeth felt his growing frustration in not learning English quickly enough. Even with all the work he had done with Elizabeth, when he spoke to other people in the day, he still had a hard time coming up with words. Elizabeth knew his frustration was transferring to her as well.

On Thursday Mabel and Elizabeth met at 6:00 A.M. at Memory Grove, the rain had just ceased and drops trickled off the Maple leaves. Elizabeth wore her binoculars around her neck

and carried her food in a slouch bag. She did not bring pencil or paper, expecting the canyon knowledge to shift directly to her. She needed to see a Northern Flicker come across a samara and choose whether or not to eat it.

Mabel wore her field hat and brought a water bottle along. “I like to observe from the clearing just before the water treatment facility,” Mabel said.

Elizabeth knew the canyon in the same way she knew Masaki’s body. She knew just when the jetting rocks would appear to her left, or how to find the chickadee’s spring. She knew the druggies hid five miles up by the elfin springs. The clearing Mabel wanted to observe from was two miles up—they would be away from the trees and with binoculars they could look straight into to a thicket of bigtooth maples.

Mabel was an environmentalist by profession and had been brought on as an outside source for Elizabeth’s thesis defense. Mabel performed environmental research for city planners and engineers. She didn’t have any power to stop freeway, housing, or retail developments but would make recommendations on how to protect the wildlife in the area. In a housing development that sat along the Oquirrh mountains she had recommended that thirty percent of the land be left as open space in order to protect the red fox. The development had followed her recommendation. But she had been to the development several times late at night and had only spotted one fox. She estimated she should have spotted twenty.

The river roared through the middle of the park and before Mabel and Elizabeth had even gotten to the beginning of the paved canyon trail Mabel shrieked. She knew before she saw what had happened.

Elizabeth looked too. Starlings. All over. Little dark mounds. Dead. Their yellow beaks pointing towards the ground, their wings tucked tightly around their bodies. Mabel squatted to

have a look. "Pesticides," she said. Elizabeth looked at the grass and could still see the little fertilization pellets.

In the canyon they didn't speak, and when they first spotted a Northern Flicker, it didn't eat the samara, which Elizabeth knew it wouldn't.

Mabel Dillon lived in a small blue house on Second Avenue. Somehow, on this Friday night Mabel found the courage to go through Gwendolyn's dresser. Gwendolyn had been away to college for three years, and by now the clothes in her dresser were out-of date-and long forgotten.

The clothes that lay in the dresser were the clothes of an over indulged teenager. Mabel winced to find that her daughter's high school wardrobe had been full of pieces that were nicer than anything Mabel owned. Mabel thought the job would be easy, that she would just stuff the clothes into garbage sacks and put them into her trunk, so that tomorrow she could take the clothes to Deseret Industries. But instead Mabel found some genuinely nice pieces that she couldn't bare to part with. Gwendolyn had left an entire drawer of scarves, woven and silk, and Mabel wondered why she hadn't taken her scarves before. Mabel hung the scarves in her own closet, and put her own blue woven scarf that had several loose strings into the Deseret Industries bag.

Another drawer was full of fancy jeans, one with a price tag still attached, and Mabel winced again to think that she had spent that kind of money on a pair of jeans. The jeans would be impossible for Mabel to wear. Her daughter, perhaps again the result of over indulgence, had grown to be six feet tall.

Mabel thought of Elizabeth. Today she had been wearing old faded jeans with a hole in the pocket, and a man's belt around her waist. Elizabeth wasn't as tall as Gwendolyn, so that the jeans would hang long, but alterations could be made.

She saw herself in Elizabeth, an ambitious young woman capable of running her own company, resistant to love, but also with moments of overcome emotion. When Mabel had pointed to the Starlings, Elizabeth had stopped, and through heavy breathing from a quick walk said, "Oh. Devastation. Oh Devastation. Like slaughter. Or black magic." Elizabeth stayed staring at the birds after Mabel walked away.

And Mabel hated herself in that moment because the only thing she could think was, *Those damn Starlings finally got what they deserve.* She wondered why Elizabeth felt so sad when garbage birds die. Mabel suspected that it had something to do with that thing about hope and feathers. Hope is the thing with feathers that perches on the soul.

On Saturday Mabel and Elizabeth ran together up City Creek Canyon, looking out for the Northern Flicker. Elizabeth found herself telling Mabel about Masaki. And wondered how Mabel, who she'd had only brief conversations with, was becoming a trusted friend, so that she told her about the frustrations and joys of being with Masaki.

Elizabeth explained that when Masaki went home for Christmas he had come back with a stuffed animal, a large cow, because it was the year of the cow, and the cow had pink ears and huge red lips. The cow was half the size of Masaki, and he had had to stuff it under the seat in front of him on his flight back to America. It was the cow, which now sat on her bed, which had made her love him.

They ran for several miles in silence. And then Mabel said, “My daughter Gwendolyn left her junior year of high school to Germany as an exchange student. She was supposed to stay a year, but at the end of the year she begged to stay another, saying that her new best friend Josephina wanted her to stay. She came back for two weeks before heading off to college. I lost my daughter when she was fifteen. I know it sounds silly. But I never really got to say goodbye, she was completely gone before I knew it, at just fifteen.”

Elizabeth checked her phone for messages when she got home. There were three from Masaki, “Elizabeth, please answer. I am very sick.”

When Elizabeth got to Masaki’s apartment she let herself in and found him in bed, asleep. She could see that he was sick. His shirt was off and his sheets were wet. Masaki looked smaller than he should, like a child. She checked his pulse, and there was no pulse, which meant severe dehydration.

Elizabeth found Masaki’s flip flops by the front door and put them on his feet. She lifted Masaki with one arm and said, “You’ve got to walk with me baby. Stay with me. Just down the stairs.” As soon as they stepped out side of the apartment and onto the landing Masaki threw up. All over his door rug and landing. He stopped. Elizabeth could see that even in his state, he would want to clean it up. “Let’s keep going Masaki, just to the car.”

Elizabeth laid Masaki across the back seat. He looked green. She didn’t bother with the seatbelt.

She ran back upstairs for a paper sack and wet a rag, and found his keys and wallet.

When she got in the car Masaki was crying.

Elizabeth raced down the freeway, away from the Great Salt Lake. And when she got him to the hospital they took Masaki to a room immediately leaving Elizabeth to check him in. She stared at the papers. She didn't know any of the answers to the questions. She was not even sure she had spelled his last name correctly. The form asked for addresses and phone numbers and medical information and allergies. Elizabeth knew nothing.

She called Masaki's parents with his phone and hoped that they were awake early. His father answered, and Elizabeth realized that he did not speak English, and Elizabeth had never bothered to learn basic words in Japanese. She tried to say "Masaki sick." And "Masaki in Hospital." And "He okay." But all Elizabeth could understand on the other end was frighten and worry.

"I will call right back."

There had to be someone in the hospital who spoke Japanese.

Elizabeth walked to the front desk. "Do you know if anyone here speaks Japanese? I need someone to call Masaki's parents, and tell them he is okay."

"I'll check." The receptionist said. And Elizabeth could see it was not a priority.

Elizabeth checked on Masaki. The nurses and doctors were inserting needles into his veins. Elizabeth saw small tubes, clear bags and tape. She could hear the instructions of the doctor. A combination of medications and Bactrum. And the words, "he should start to calm down now."

Elizabeth went back to the lobby. She only had her keys, Masaki's keys, a wallet and a throw-up bag. She looked through Masaki's wallet. There was a picture of his older sister, and a photo of his new niece. Tucked behind his Drivers License, she found a folded piece of paper. It was hand written,

The northern flicker:

This is a woodpecker. The male wear a mustache. They eat ants with a barbed tongue. They eat beetle larvae and berries. The Northern flicker will migrate south. They carve nest out of tree. The European Starling take away the Flicker's nesting sites. When they want a mate they bob their head and call, wik-a-wik-a-wik-a-wik-a. They happy in urban areas.

Masaki's phone rang, and this time it was not his father, but his father's friend, who spoke English.

"This is Elizabeth. I called about Masaki. I have had to take him to the hospital for severe dehydration. He now has an I.V. full of fluids, I mean water, and he should be fine."

Elizabeth remembered the reason for the initial call and asked her questions.

"Does Masaki have any allergies?" The question was relayed to Masaki's father, and a reply was made.

"Yes. Sulfur."

She filled out the form like this.

"I will have Masaki call you when he is awake."

Elizabeth went back to Masaki's room. And there, the group of staff stood and stared at her with white faces.

“Masaki is allergic to Sulfur,” Elizabeth said.

And a nurse whispered, “The Bactrum.”

Masaki’s body was blue and Elizabeth focused on his eyelashes. She had never noticed how thick they were.

The staff left and Elizabeth lay next to Masaki. He was still warm. Elizabeth fell asleep like this. She dreamed she was in a vat of milk, swimming.

When Elizabeth finally left the hospital it was ten o’clock at night. Masaki’s body would be flown to Japan the next day. And Elizabeth would not be able to go to the funeral.

Elizabeth’s house was just as she left it. Messy. The sink was filled with dishes, and bottles of jam and peanut butter were left opened on the counter.

Elizabeth had another message on her phone—this time from Mabel.

Her message said,

I have been pacing here, wondering if I am hysterical and silly to call. But I just can’t stop thinking about what an awful sight we saw yesterday. Those dead Starlings! And I usually say that I hate Starlings. But when I got right up close to them and saw the potent blue in their feathers, and the sweet yellow beak, I felt such suffering for them. I must tell you, that I don’t think I could have been with a sweeter person at that moment. And you will never believe this—when I was driving home I saw our Northern Flicker flying from tree to tree alongside my car, and it seemed to me a tremendous display of hope for me. It is a hope that belongs to you too. After seeing those awful Starlings! Anyway, I will go, but thank you for being with me the past days.

Elizabeth filled the sink with soapy water and washed the utensils, glasses and bowls. She left them to dry on the counter, on top of a towel.

Salt Lake to Mona

In the back of Reed's Toyota Tercel was a two man tent, two sleeping bags, a pillow, matches, marshmallow roasters, marshmallows, Hershey bars, graham crackers, a queen size air mattress with a built in air pump, a duffle bag with two days worth of clothes, toothpaste, toothbrush, a box of Trojans, baby wipes, Kleenex, a can of honey roasted almonds and a bag of beef jerky. What he knew Katie would have was her own pillow, her own clothes, an extra blanket and a water container.

Reed was driving south on I-15 from Salt Lake (he took classes in biochemistry at the University of Utah) to Mona, where his girlfriend Katie lived. He drove to Mona every weekend, and together they worked in the desert heat until they dripped sea. Katie had lived in Mona for two years after responding to a classified ad that read, "ROOM AND BOARD PLUS SALARY- In exchange for care of 8 horses and care of resident. Must live in. Experienced Equestrian a plus but not required." Reed begged her to stay in Salt Lake where he imagined they could get an apartment together. But Katie had said, "I need horses," and moved south. Until then she had never had a horse.

Today Reed was planning to set up a tent a half a mile from the house in Mona. Katie didn't know about his plan. He thought he would surprise her. He thought he would follow the canal road over the hill and set up the tent on a grass field. He had re-counted the poles and bought stronger stakes. He stopped at the IFA in South Jordan to pick up some firewood and at Katie's request, some sulfur to keep the snakes away and flaxseed to keep Cherry's coat a silky red.

When he pulled up the driveway he could see Katie standing in the middle of the arena, her sun-streaked hair was pulled into a bun and her freckles looked brighter than the week

before. The sun was setting behind her, and the mountains in the background glowed purple. There was dust encircling Katie and Cherry. She held a rag and there was a yellow bucket at her feet. Cherry shifted her hind feet like she wanted to dash. Katie dropped her rag in the bucket when she saw Reed. “Hey you! I keep wondering when you will get sick of kicking shit with me!” She opened the gate and ran to Reed, jumped on him, kissed his neck and then his nose.

Reed took out the flaxseed and sulfur. They each carried a bag to the tack room by the stables, Katie walked ahead.

“How was your week?” Reed asked.

“Not so good. Cherry tore her face on the trailer. She is sliced up good over her eye and across her cheek. I’m sick about it. I took Cherry to the door of the house so Alden could have a look at her. We washed her up together, and he said she should heal up fine. I hope that’s true, because I won’t forgive myself if I’ve mangled the prettiest horse here. I’ve been washing her cut and rubbing Corona over it, which she isn’t happy about. I’ve been running her hard and feeding her extra so that I don’t have to work on an angry, hungry horse.”

Katie was behind on everything. The stalls looked like they hadn’t been cleaned in days, there was a stack of dirty bits, the sawdust needed to be changed, and in the dry July heat the barn looked crackled and needed paint, and Molly, the quarter horse, was looking heavy, like she could use a good long run. Alden’s horse farm was starting to look like the rest of the town. There were only two businesses in town, a B & D Burgers and a trading post that wasn’t really operating. You could see the garbage piled up behind the front window. The sides of the streets were filled with buses and RV’s and new trucks and old trucks.

Katie grabbed a stack of bits and wiped her hand across her forehead leaving a dust smudge along her hairline. “What did you do this week?”

Reed couldn't say what he really did because it would expose too much, because all he did was think about Katie and how he hated that they lived apart. The weekdays were starting to go by slower, and the mornings were the worst because the sun shined bright into his room and promised a lie, a good day without Katie.

"I slept, and ate, went to school, went to work."

Katie smiled wide at Reed. "Come say hi to Alden. I'm going to run these bits through the dishwasher." They passed Cherry on the way to the house. Her red mane mirrored the setting sun. It was a clean cut except at the cheek where the cut was jagged and deep. Cherry kicked over the bucket of water. "She is on one this week. I can't tell if she is in heat or if she's just mad about the cut." Katie handed the bits to Reed, and Reed thought about a mare's devotion, and how no allegiance is strong enough to keep a mare in heat from protecting her own will to reproduce; all other loyalties lose to this desire. Now that Katie and Reed were apart most the time, he couldn't track Katie's cycle anymore, didn't know when he needed to tiptoe around her or when she wanted him. Reed had another year of school, and Katie hoped that when he finished he would come live in Mona, where they would take care of Alden until he died and then buy the property. She was saving every penny, even growing Raspberries and selling Jam at the farmers' market.

"Katie," Reed said, "I want you to camp with me tonight, just over the hill by the canal."

Katie stared back at him. Her eyes wide and Reed couldn't tell if she was angry or surprised.

Katie looked back at the Mare, who was now leaning into Katie, and with her arms down, leaned into the horse and whispered, "Okay," just loud enough for Reed to hear.

Katie was in the shower when Reed came into the house, he had already set up the tent, the airmattress, zipped the two sleeping bags together and made a pit for the fire. Alden was on the couch watching *Cops*.

“Hey, my man,” said Reed.

“Reed.” Alden pushed hard with both hands on his armchair so he could stand and shake hands with Reed. Reed knew this hurt. “Come to visit your call girl?”

At nights in Mona, Reed would climb into bed with Katie and he would take off her shirt and suck on her shoulder and then on her collar bone and Katie would whisper, “Okay, but you’ve got to be quiet and fast. Alden’s asleep and I don’t want him waking up panicked and thinking there’s an emergency.” So Reed would be as quiet as he could, trying not to breath, barely moving, and Katie would laugh and say, “Shush. You sound like a bear. Can’t you be any quieter?”

Now Reed said, “If she were my call girl she would be coming to visit me and we both know how often that happens.”

“True, True.” Alden smiled sideways and pointed at Reed.

“Sit back down, do you want me to bring you a drink?” Reed asked.

“All we’ve got is water. There’s not even any milk in the house. Katie hasn’t done anything since that horse scraped her face. I sent her to the store for milk but all she came back with was baby shampoo, saying it should be mild enough for Cherry’s cut. Pretty soon we are going to have to eat hay like the horses.”

Reed walked to the fridge and opened it. One of the shelves was missing and there was a box of apples that said, FOR THE HORSES, there were eggs, some Tupperware full of who-knows-what and a carton of strawberries with a note taped on that said, FOR WALKER. In the

cupboard he found a can of Crystal Light mix, so Reed mixed five scoops into a pitcher of water and added ice from the freezer. He carried a glass for himself and Alden to the living room and sat down on the couch to watch *Cops*.

“How’s your arthritis this week?”

“I can’t complain,”

Reed knew that Alden’s hips were tighter and tighter from the arthritis. He might need to get them replaced. It took him a long time to get across the floor. Reed wondered when Katie would need to start bathing him.

On the T.V. there was a guy in Las Vegas, right on the strip, trying to make a run from the cop with a handful of marijuana in his hand. The cop was alone and huffing and nervous but got the wriggling guy to the ground.

“He shouldn’t have tried to run, he could have gotten off with a misdemeanor and now he’ll be charged with resisting arrest,” Reed said.

“Or he should have run faster,” said Alden.

“That never works.”

“It does if you’re Butch Cassidy.” They were just an hour from the place where Butch Cassidy was born. It was Butch Cassidy’s West that Katie was drawn to. Wildness.

When Katie appeared she had put on a pair of clean jeans and a flannel shirt and thick socks. Her hair was wet. Her cheeks were red from a hot shower.

“Alden, Reed and I are sleeping out tonight. What can I help you with before we go?” said Katie.

“You’re sleeping out there? With all the horse shit?”

“We call it fresh air,” said Reed.

“I know what you call it and it isn’t fresh air. I’ll just fry up some potatoes. But if you don’t go to the store tomorrow I’m going myself and deducting it from your wages.”

“You don’t want to deduct wages from the person who counts out your pills.” Katie pulled on her cowboy boots by the kitchen door. Reed was holding Katie’s pillow and blanket and filled a mason’s jar with water.

“Goodnight old man.” She kissed Alden on the forehead.

“Goodnight.” He said.

Katie still had to do her evening chores. When Reed came back for the firewood Katie was in the barn, her hair was undone and she was humming a country song. The lights gleamed and she was setting the water and hay. Reed took over getting the grain ready before they let the horses in.

“I love this time of night, Reed. Everything is so warm and fluffy,” Katie said.

Katie whistled for the horses to come in. She stood with the barn door open, like a chauffer or a doorman. The horses came in, all of them from the pasture and paddocks. They didn’t need a halter; they just walked right into their own stalls and waited for Reed to close them in. Cherry was not Reed’s favorite horse. She wasn’t a fast learner on her training days, and she always gave the farrier a hard time. But Molly was a sweet horse, and tonight he rubbed his cheek against her cheek, and Molly seemed to want him to stay.

Reed understood why Katie would barely leave the horse farm. He had a hard time getting her to go to the Tiara café in Nephi on a Saturday night. “What if a horse gets colic while I’m gone? The horse would kill Alden before he could do a thing about it,” she would say.

Which is why Reed had come up with this plan to go camping right on the property, just out of site of the house.

Reed said, “Hop on the four-wheeler, I’ll drive you to our camp site.”

They sat by the fire and Katie hummed. Reed recognized the songs. They were all about Jesus or sex. And then Katie sang a song aloud, “Ladybug, Ladybug, Fly away home, your house is on fire, and your children, they will burn.”

“Where did you learn to sing Katie?”

“At church, we had to learn all the parts.”

Reed slept holding Katie, her hair smelled of shampoo and smoke and her bare feet tangled with his, her body was always warmer than his own.

She was gone when Reed woke up. He wondered if she would have gone to the store without him. Their weekly trip to the store was the closest Reed and Katie got to going on a date. But when he put on his pants and opened the tent he could see the dust coming up over the hill at the arena, which meant that the horses were just coming out. He rode back to the stables on the ATV.

Katie was on Molly the quarter horse, running her in circles around the large arena. The other horses were out at pasture. Katie’s posture on the horse, he noticed, had improved a lot, her back was straight like iron, like she could hold a porcelain dish on the top of her head, and it wouldn’t fall. Her hands were close to her legs, almost resting but still engaged. If you glanced, you wouldn’t think that she was running the horse but Katie was in complete control.

“Hey! You were sleeping like a baby, I didn’t dare wake you up!” Katie called.

“Should we go to the store?” Reed was hungry since all he had eaten the night before was some beef jerky.

“I’ll meet you in the car!”

Reed drove while Katie made a grocery list. They wanted fixings for a big breakfast, and steaks for Sunday, and sandwich meat. Katie read the list out loud.

Reed shifted into fourth gear. They would drive to Nephi and go to the Albertson’s there. “Are you making my eggs?”

“Oh my. Your eggs. Alden loves them. Did you know that he had never even bought a bottle of salsa before I moved in? Now he eats it on everything, his eggs, his steak, his beans.” Reed grew up mixing havarti with scrambled eggs and seasoning them with salsa. He had taught Katie the trick.

“I wanted to ask you about the quarter horse. Have you noticed she’s getting fat? Have you been riding her?” Reed said.

“Do you think she is pregnant?”

“It’s just a thought.”

Molly the quarter horse was just a foal when Katie came to Mona, she had trained her, and Katie had spent many nights sleeping in the barn because Molly was scared of a thunderstorm. Now Katie was quiet for a long time until she finally said, “I didn’t think she was old enough.”

Katie was absent minded with her chores that day, she’d start grooming one horse and then stop, with only half the coat brushed, then start scrubbing a feed bin, where she would then turn to the pasture and lead a horse to the arena, and run it for a few clumsy turns. Reed found

Katie sitting in the middle of the pasture, with her flannel shirt tied around her waist, wearing a tank top. The horses sensed to stay away from her. Reed took the cue from the horses.

He kept working until he was covered with sweat and dust. Reed had not been able to give up the idea of Katie coming back to Salt Lake.

In the late afternoon Alden appeared. His hands were disproportionately bigger than the rest of his body, his veins were large and the pads of his fingers were calloused even though Katie now did all the hard work. Alden held a case of strawberries. Reed and Alden gave Walker handfuls of the ripe fruit. Walker got strawberry juice on the gray hairs around his chin.

“Before you go back inside, will you come look at Molly?” Reed asked.

“Sure, what for?” said Alden.

“Seems tired.”

At this Alden looked at Walker and shook his head, “Once a stallion always a stallion. Walker, why the hell am I treating you like you’re in an old folks home when on the sly your chasing the youngest mares.”

Together they inspected Molly’s belly.

Katie was in the grooming room rubbing Corona on Cherry’s cut. Katie, looked defeated, as if the lives of the horses were her own life, like she was pregnant and had gotten her head bashed in and was getting old.

The Burraston ponds are just outside of Mona. They drove in Reed’s Toyota. And when they got there no one else was there. And it was hot. The swing hanging from the tree was not in use. The teenagers, it seemed had been there the night before, drinking beer and leaving the

bottles and condoms in the brush. They parked at the far end, where it loops. They walked through brush and Reed frightened a Merlin, it's long pointed wings soared out of his stolen nest. Katie was undressing now. Her dusty clothes became a pile around her feet. Reed undressed too. Not because he wanted to, but because he didn't want to take away from Katie's fun by being the guy that sits on the bank and wont get in. Katie jumped in first, she smoothed her hair back into the water.

“Reed, stay with me,” she called. “Stay.”

“No. You come back with me.” He jumped in and swam towards her. And they went on like this yelling “Salt Lake” and “Mona”. And whoever says it first wins. And whoever swims to the rope and back first wins. And no, that didn't count. And rock, paper, scissors, I win. And by the time they were done they had both won and lost a hundred times and still didn't know where they should live.

Katie sat on a rock. Then Reed squeezed next to her. They were naked and wet. The sun warmed their chills.

“Stay Reed.” Katie said. And Reed knew that he couldn't. He couldn't stay.

Reed brushed Molly that night. He sang her Katie's ladybug song.

When Reed came to the tent Katie was in her bra and underwear and asleep on the top of the bags. She woke up to say, “I love this little tent, Reed.”

“I do to.”

“What did Alden say about Molly?”

“She's pregnant.”

Katie took off her bra.

“Don’t go back to Salt Lake, Reed.”

Reed took off his clothes and kissed Katie’s neck. She smelled like apple and milk.

“Shhhh,” he whispered.

Katie’s blue eyes were covered in tears. The tears ran back to her hair.

They climbed into the sleeping bag where their skin brushed the flannel lining until they faced each other. Reed tried to run his fingers through Katie’s hair, but there were too many knots. He traced the lines of her ear. He smoothed his hand across her side. Katie kissed Reed’s lips.

“Katie,” Reed said. She kept kissing.

She was on him now, leading him in. There wasn’t a condom.

“Don’t worry,” she said.

She was small and clumsy. He held onto her head, with his thumbs on her cheeks. The sleeping bag fell down around her hips. She pressed onto him harder.

“Katie,” he said.

“Don’t worry,” she said.

“I’m not,” he said.

Her breasts touched his chest.

“Katie.”

