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The Bear Went Over the Mountain

Sonja Mongar
University of New Orleans

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THE BEAR WENT OVER THE MOUNTAIN

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

by

Sonja S. Mongar

B.A. University of North Florida, 1994
M.A. University of Central Florida, 2001

May 2004

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DEDICATION

For those who come after us:
Dakota, Connor, Eric Jr., Ross, Tylor, Joey, Clarence
and Hillary

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Melvin, *mi media naranja*, has been with me during this entire project, from listening to every painful revelation to spending hours, even days figuring out how to layout text and meet format requirements. Ultimately he's always had more faith in me than I have had in myself. Hillary, my daughter, has read nearly everything I have written and even passed it around to the "girls" in her department on those long nights she worked on the phones in the customer service. My mother, though she couldn't bear to read these stories, always answered my questions patiently and encouraged me the best she could. My son, Clarence, always cheered me on even though he'd rather have me living a much more traditional life as his mother. My brother, Eric, who fills composition books with handwritten satires that he never shows to anybody always respected my need to be read.

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ABSTRACT

“The Bear Went Over the Mountain” is a memoir that marks the people, events, landscape, and era that shapes a woman’s identity as she journeys from adolescence to adulthood. The story evolves through accretion with the use of a variety of writing strategies such as third person limited omniscient narrator, auto-fiction, mosaic, and disrupted narrative. Other conventions of Creative Non-fiction are used such as dialogue, characterization and plot. Autotopography (photographs) are used to create a motif of ancestral ghosts. They haunt the lives of these characters as they act and react to plots that began long before they were born. An ancestral photograph is placed with the date of the story at the beginning of each section. The mismatching photograph and date is intended to show how these fierce personalities, long dead, have carved their presence into the lives and fates of these characters.

We must redeem the dreams and debts of our heritage or else perish
as a result of unfinished curses.
Shot in the Heart, Mikhail Gilmore



White Sulphur Springs

1960

CHAPTER 1

Tea In the Parlor

“Bet she hasn’t even been in this room in years,” she said to no one, running her fingers over the dark, heavy furniture, brushing away dust and cobwebs. They must have had tea in this room. It might be White Sulphur Springs, Montana, but Great Grandma Sarter was a proper woman in her day. Even if she was a second-generation cattle rancher, she had manners and came from money.

June imagined herself sitting in the high-backed winged chair in a long silk dress, a string of pearls at her throat and pouring tea from a gleaming silver teapot. Serving tea to cowboys, huh? The image was a little jarring. That’s not so bad. At least Grandma had had a house and security and respect.

She crossed the room, stepping over stacks of magazines and boxes of yellowed papers, twirling in her imaginary gown in the open space she found at the edge of the worn Persian carpet. Her reflection in the glass doors of the China cabinet stopped her instantly. “I’m so fat,” she moaned patting the puffy stomach that had held her toddling son not so long ago. He was still fast asleep on the couch. She had laid a clean blanket under him because the couch was so dusty.

“I should have lost this by now. Tom can’t stand it. That’s why he’s always looking at other women,” she said sadly as his favorite nickname echoed in her ears, “fat dumpy housewife.” He’d called her other things too, like frigid, a word he’d picked up in psychology class. He had a word for everything for that matter, words that marched through their conversations that she pretended she knew but had to look up later. Mostly she just kept her mouth shut and listened. It worked better that way.

Focusing past her reflection in the windows of the cabinet, she gazed longingly at the ceramic dishes and the tarnished silver tea service, seeing neither the chips and cracks nor the dingy metal. Almost three hundred years earlier, they had been lovingly packed by women's hands. They had survived an Atlantic Ocean voyage in a three-masted ship from London to Jamestown. They had gotten to Montana eventually over prairies and mountain ranges by way of covered wagon.

The sound of the wheels rolling over the worn kitchen linoleum interrupted her daydreaming. Then she heard the old lady's brittle cackle and the rumbling voice of her elderly son, Maxie. It made her think of how the old lady had bristled when she found out that her great-grandson had married a Catholic. Tom explained to her that his great-grandmother had come from a long line of staunch Church of England followers. "If she only knew her precious great-grandson was an atheist," June laughed to herself thinking how he had explained religion away with another phrase, "opiate of the masses." But the world was full of contradictions, not like she used to believe when she was a girl daydreaming over stories she read while hiding in the outhouse. Just the sight of a book used to send her mother into a rampage. Girls weren't supposed to go to school or be smart and especially read books. She read all the books she wanted now, while she washed dishes or when the babies were all asleep. They were books Tom wouldn't touch. "Fiction?" He would say, "What kind of a waste of paper is that?" She read them anyway, out of his sight. She needed her fiction to get her through the day.

Knowing the old lady couldn't get her wheelchair into the parlor to discover her nosy activities, she returned to her digging. "It's such a shame, she doesn't even use this stuff anymore. I'd love to have it—someday when I get a house. Wonder who the old lady will leave it to when she dies?" She said as she shuffled through a box. Pulling out a heavy, ornate book held shut by brass clasps, she opened to find it full of photographs. Dark, brooding faces looked

back at her, little girls in ringlets and fancy, hoop skirts, and stout women wearing jett jewelry, black lace and severe buns. The gentlemen stood at attention in stiff wool suits, all of them frozen in time by the click of a shutter a hundred years earlier.

When she looked closer, she noticed they all shared a joyless, empty expression, just like the old lady in the kitchen and most of Tom's other relatives she had met. None of them had been nice to her or offered a bit of support or help except Tom's father. But even that had backfired. There was a big bill at the Missoula Mercantile she couldn't pay. She was pregnant then, two little girls at home and working full time while Tom went to school. Tom's father had felt sorry for her and paid it off. When Tom found out, he went crazy, accusing her of having sex with his father in exchange. He'd even gone far enough to suggest the new baby wasn't even his.

She sat for a moment, her insides churning. She'd been here before hundreds of times, trying to figure things out. Looking around the room stuffed with furniture, knickknacks, pictures, and dishes she wondered why some people had so much while she had grown up with so little. The kids at school had teased her unmercifully for living in the little wooden house with peeling orange paint, on the other side of the train tracks. The bad news was that there was a little house like that in every town her family moved to as her father followed the railroad, working up and down the Milwaukee line. There was no use trying to understand why her life was like this. It just was and that was all there was to it. She snapped the book shut on the faces that seemed like vindictive ghosts hovering over her life.

"June," she heard from outside the window, startling her. "June," she heard again. It was Tom calling her name. She hated the way he said it, hard and stilted, like a drill sergeant. She had to answer as quickly as any recruit in boot camp, or he would get mad. She pushed open the heavy drapes to tap on the window to let him know the baby was asleep and she'd be right out.

Through the rippled glass, she saw him flapping his arms excitedly, his face puffed up and red. She wasn't sure if he was already mad. For a moment she tried to conjure that handsome, boyish face with the curly hair that fell over it and who had impressed her so with his intellect. Had she loved him when she married him? No. But she could, she had thought when they stood in front of the justice of the peace, she could love him. "But that's how you live," she said through the glass, knowing he couldn't hear her. Her mother had told her just that, "This is as good as it gets."

"Besides, it's not so bad. I could be stuck in some cowtown with a farmer who comes in with manure on his boots every day. When we get out of Montana and Tom finishes school, he will be better, happier. And I'll have my big house and maybe even Grandma's china. Nobody will laugh at me then," she said as she tiptoed out of the Victorian parlor, so as not to wake her baby boy.

CHAPTER 2

The Boy Under the Bubble of Glass

Almost giddy as he shuffled through the dusty stacks of '78s he had found in the parlor, he called out the titles, "Look, June, here's 'Red River Valley.' I love that one and 'Don't Fence Me In.' You gotta hear these."

He played his favorites on the old phonograph over and over. The voices were scratchy and faint but he still remembered every word, singing them loudly;

"I want to ride to the ridge where the west commences

And gaze at the moon till I lose my senses

And I can't look at hobbles and I can't stand fences

Don't fence me in.

No. Poppa, don't you fence me in."

Once he had wanted to be a tenor singer, a fantasy he had acted out in his great-grandmother's Victorian parlor when he was a child. He'd gather all the stuffed animals and dolls and set them around the room. Then he'd bow to his audience from the center of the Persian carpet; playing the record, singing along with his childish high-pitched voice. He'd bow again when he was finished, grinning, his chest puffing to the imaginary applause.

He had played other games too, like safari, based on the box of stereographs in the parlor, faded images of Africa and Paris. Or he gave speeches to an imaginary audience, like he had heard on the radio or had seen when his great-grandmother had taken him to political rallies in town. Most of all, he loved to conduct symphonies, Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, whom he would play on the phonograph. His great-grandmother had made sure he was exposed to the proper influences.

All of these memories flooded into him faster than he could tell to his attentive wife and two small daughters. The girls might be too young to know what he was talking about but followed him around the room, touching the furniture, the old toys, looking into boxes he opened and paging through the magazines he had spread out for them to see. Several times his oldest daughter wandered to the upright piano against the wall, near the fireplace, but he scolded her away. Great-Grandma Sarter didn't want anyone touching her long dead daughter, Cora's, piano.

"Look at the date on this National Geographic, 1897," he said whistling. "She must have every one ever published." He glanced at the stacks of magazines scattered throughout the room. His eyes eventually stopped on a framed portrait under a bubble of curved glass hanging on the wall. It was a hand colored photograph of a curly, blonde-haired, blue-eyed boy dressed in wool jodhpurs and English riding boots with a thick ribbed wool turtleneck sweater and a tiny wool cap. The boy was holding a miniature quirt. "That's me, that's me," he said taking it off the wall for everyone to see.

As he cradled the picture of the darling blue-eyed cherub, something hard jabbed into his chest. The face of the boy was so innocent and sweet. How could anybody hurt a little boy with a face like that? And where had the sweetness and innocence of that boy disappeared? He knew it was a part of him that had been left in this parlor so long ago. The ghost of his child self was everywhere. Something heavy welled up and stopped at the back of his eyes, but didn't break free.

"My mother took me away from here," he said feeling hot blood rush to his face and his jaw clamp shut at the mention her.

"What happened?" June asked sympathetically knowing the story by heart that she had heard many times of his crazy cowgirl mother who loved her horses more than she loved her own children.

“You know what she wanted me to be? A trick rider for the rodeo. Can you believe that?” He repeated it with disgust. “And my father. All I can remember is him taking me in the barn and beating me with baling wire. I don’t even remember what I did. Sleeping in barns and shacks, following the rodeos and horse shows. Eating canned peas for months. I can’t even stand to look at a pea,” he ranted on and on. Finally he set the picture down and fell back into the high back chair.

She knew it was true, remembering the plate flying through the kitchen and hitting the wall the first time she served him canned peas with dinner.

“And that bastard Beaver, I told you about him, that psychotic Indian stepfather who used to beat us with the bull whip and wore loaded six guns to bed. I can still smell his filthy sweat that day the cops came to get him. He grabbed me and held a pistol to my head for six hours, until the cops talked him out of it.”

June walked to him and put a comforting hand on his shoulder. “But look now, you’re getting out of here. You got your graduate fellowship at the University of Oregon. Have you told your grandmother you’re leaving?” Her face was soft and caring. As usual she was pointing his life forward instead of letting it slip into that dark yawning abyss that followed him wherever he went. For a moment seeing her long brown hair falling over her beautiful face as she leaned towards him warmed him to his soul. He needed her, needed that softness and caring, that tenderness he’d never known before her. Something like love welled up in his chest but stopped dead at this throat. If she knew how he really felt, she would just leave him like everyone else had done. Better to keep her guessing.

“No, but I will tomorrow, when I ask her for the money,” he said. He had a plan. He was getting out of Montana and never coming back. That thought gave him strength. He would show them all who he was and what he was really made of. He’d show them all.

CHAPTER 3

When the Hoot Owl Calls Your Name

“Get out here! Look!” Tom called excitedly to June through the glass of the parlor window. “You got to see this.”

June glanced at the house, “The baby.”

“Don’t worry about it. We won’t be gone long,” he said, taking her by the hand and pulling her through an overgrown trail to the dilapidated barn. The roof had partly caved in.

“Is it safe?” She asked.

He didn’t answer, just pulled her roughly through the open door to a corner of the barn stacked with boxes and furniture.

June looked around. An old buggy was parked in a dark corner. Farm implements and tools, horse tack and bales of hay occupied the walls. She could see a barn owl roosting in the eaves and evidence of field mice everywhere. Everything was covered with dust and cobwebs, just like the parlor. No one had been in here in years. She covered her nose and mouth with her hand and sneezed several times.

Some of the boxes were open, stacks of paper next to them. “Look at this.” He handed her a large yellowed folded document. Unfolding it carefully, she read the title, “Paul Family 1540 AD to 1895 AD. This goes back three hundred years to England and then to the colonies,” she said incredulously.

Grabbing it from her, he read it aloud, “John Paul, born 1756, Jamestown, died 1801. A man of great girth and courage, of six and a half feet and three hundred pounds, with a party of revolutionaries, kidnapped British General Braddock by carrying him bodily from his bed and back across enemy lines in the dead of night.”

He read a few others, not as colorful, but indicating he had come from a long line of educated aristocrats including deacons and politicians. “Isn’t this great,” he laughed, showing her a deed for a large tract of land in the Ohio Valley signed by Andrew Jackson along with a bankruptcy notice and a photograph of a distant grandfather, an officer in the Union Army during the Civil War.

“I’m going to ask her if I can have them,” he said gathering them into his arms.

“What are you going to do with them?” June asked.

“Frame ‘em. Won’t they look great on the wall next to my diplomas?”

As they exited the barn she heard the owl hoot twice. “My mother always said that if you hear the hoot owl in the daytime, it’s bad luck,” she told her husband.

“God you’re so stupid. That’s just superstition borne of backwardness and ignorance, like your family. They’re all morons just like you,” he taunted.

Inside the house, the old lady was having lunch in the kitchen. His great-uncle Maxie was standing at the coal stove in an apron stirring a pot of soup and sipping a glass of straight whiskey while his two little daughters were crouched at the booth-style kitchen table, their eyes large saucers, looking like scared animals. Bowls of soup and sandwiches sat in front of them but they didn’t appear to be eating. June called a cheery hello as she slipped through the kitchen and back to the parlor to tend to the baby while Tom sat down at the table.

“Sit up straight there,” the twisted old lady in the wheelchair said curtly to the littlest girl, “and get your hands off the table.” The girl flushed in embarrassment dropping her hands into her lap. “Your kids don’t have any manners, Tom. Aren’t you teaching them anything?” Her words ran together over her toothless gums.

He shrugged, stung by her criticism but too intent on his mission to let it slow him down. “Look what I found in the barn,” he said spreading the documents out on the table.

The old lady eyed him, her blue eyes like two burning embers deep in her skull. “What are you doing bothering with that?”

“Well, I want to know if I can have them.”

“That’s my personal business, Tom. You just put it back. You’ve got a lot of nerve going through my papers.” Her voice had risen to shrill level, her frail body trembling.

Maxie turned, “Now don’t upset her. Mama’s too old for that.”

Tom’s cheeks flushed. Why couldn’t she see how much it meant to him? Why did everybody always work against him, his father, his mother, now his great grandmother. Couldn’t they see that he was more than the son of a crazy cowgirl, destined for greater things? He had the proof in his hands and in his accomplishments. He may as well break the news.

“Grandma, I’m leaving Montana and I’m not coming back. I got a fellowship at the University of Oregon. I’m going to get my PhD and then I want to go into politics.”

“Politics, huh? You? How are you going to do that with those things hanging on and you’ll just have bunch more with that Catholic wife of yours?” She said, pointing to his two daughters. They cringed under the weight of her bony finger even though they had no idea why she was pointing at them.

He could feel the rage rise in his shoulders and shoot into his fists. Biting down on his back teeth, he held on to it.

“I need some help. I need some money to get a place to live and get set up in Eugene. I have a little and June will get a job when we get there, but I need some to tide me over until I get money from the university.”

“Money? What do you think, money grows on trees? I worked for my money, on the range, in the fields; we made something out of nothing out here. What have you done to earn my money?”

He stood trembling. Grabbing the papers, he stomped from the room with her cackle sticking into his back like barbed wire.

CHAPTER 4

Say Good-bye To Grandma

Two somber looking little girls in matching blue and white plaid coats, wool bonnets tied at their chins stood stiffly together on the sagging porch of the dilapidated white house. They looked almost exactly alike even though they weren't twins. But that was something they didn't mind, same coats, same dresses—but different colors, same shoes, same socks. Next to them was a tiny, bent old woman in a wheelchair with her head bobbing. She was saying something but the little girls didn't know what.

"Smile girls," their father said, snapping a picture.

"Five generations alive, can you believe it?" He said to the old woman with his hand on her shoulder. "Your grandmother's ninety-one years old, girls, ninety-one. She was born in a covered wagon."

The girls nodded blankly.

"Now kiss your grandmother goodbye. We won't see her again for awhile."

The littlest girl shrank back whining. The creature in the chair looked just like a monster to her.

Her father pushed her towards the monster and she cried, "I don't want to, Daddy."

He ordered his older daughter to kiss her while he yanked the littlest girl to the corner of the porch for a talk.

The older girl was terrified too but she knew better than to disobey her father. As she approached the old woman, her mottled, papery skin seemed to hang on her bones like clothes that were too big. Her sunken eyes that had seen almost a hundred years blazed from her skull. Her cheeks and mouth dipped into the vacuum of no teeth. As the older girl strained over the

wheel chair to reach her, she noticed the large, fleshy moles with thick black hairs sticking out. The smell of urine and old clothes made her gag.

She suddenly felt like running, but her father would turn into an even scarier monster if she did. She brushed her great-great grandmother's cheek with her lips, bringing a toothless smile to the old lady's face. Then the old lady patted her head with a twisted, bony hand.

Once the front porch became a tiny speck from the car window, she heard her mother ask her father something about money and papers.

"No money," her father said, "but the papers are in my suitcase."

"No money, how are we going to do this?" Her mother asked in a worried voice.

"Don't know," he said hitting the steering wheel with his palm.

"She give you the papers?"

"No. But it doesn't matter. I'm never coming back here, ever."



Denton
1962

CHAPTER 5

Prologue to the Big Empty

In the middle of the night, the Empire Builder slowed at a small, dilapidated wooden building with peeling orange paint. The only indication of where we were was a faded sign that read “Great Falls.” Nothing familiar emerged from the dark horizon defined only by the light from a moonless sky crowded with a glittering carpet of stars.

The air was crisp and chilly as the sleepy man in a blue uniform with gold buttons seemed to hurry us and our suitcases onto the creaking wooden platform from the roomy, carpeted rows of thickly upholstered, high-backed seats. “A’board, “ he called, though there was no one but us to hear him. Quickly he pulled his step stool up behind him, the train soon lumbering off into the blackness leaving us with only the hum of the dim lighting on the platform.

Inside, a thin, jittery, baggy-eyed dispatcher looked up blankly from his desk at the four of us in the doorway of his smoke-filled office. I wonder what he saw under the glare of the fluorescent lights? A pretty, young woman in a wrinkled dress, matching pumps, with a small boy asleep in her arms. Two thin young girls flanking her, each holding a piece of her dress as if their life depended on it—a mismatch of suitcases and bags sprawled around them. It must have been obvious that we had been traveling by train for several days, sleeping however best we could in the seats, eating and drinking nothing but peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and pop.

“I’m Dan Hildahl’s daughter,” my mother said to the dispatcher. He nodded and spoke a few words into a walkie-talkie then told us to make ourselves comfortable in the waiting room.

The waiting room smelled of dust, old wood and stale coffee. We curled up on the wooden benches on beds of clothes from our suitcases. My mother didn’t sleep, but sat stiffly

upright like a sentinel at the end of the bench with my brother's head in her lap, her eyes unblinking as she sipped the stale brew. The few times I opened my eyes during the night, she was still there, in the same position, staring at the stained, plaster wall.

We woke the next morning to the rumble of a freight engine pulling in front of the depot. My mother quickly repacked and looking into a compact mirror added a touch of rouge to her cheeks, and lipstick to her lips. After she brushed her long brown hair, she wrapped a scarf around her head that gave off the heady scent of Tabu. It gave me an instantly dizzying headache.

She raked the brush through our hair, washed our faces and hands in the bathroom and within minutes we were presentable and standing on the depot platform ready to go.

The dull orange and black idling monster heaving thick, dark smoke at the depot platform was nothing like the Empire Builder. "Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific Railroad" was barely visible on its side through layers of dirt. At the sight of the engine, I began to chew on my wrist. "Stop that," my mother snapped, yanking my wrist out of my mouth and slapping my hand. It was a habit I had been unable to break. When she wasn't looking, I pulled strands of my hair into my mouth to chew on instead.

The sooty, greasy man on the platform smiled and waved us over to a stepstool. "Well, I'll be damned," the engineer guffawed. "So Dan's yer father? He's quite a man, yer father. Don't talk much but, boy, can he throw back some Irish whiskey an' don' even show it." My mother smiled politely as the engineer rambled on about how my grandfather was a legend for his ability to lay track with out the use of surveying equipment. "A cock 'a the head, a squint 'a the eye, and a 'That'll do,'" he laughed.

She smiled again as he steadied her by the elbow. Gripping the handrails, she managed the distance from the stepstool to the ladder gracefully despite her beige pumps and the matching tailored dress that hugged her shapely figure.

Once safely balanced, she turned and held out her gloved hands as the man handed Tommy to her. He wailed and twisted wildly in the man's arms causing him to almost lose his grip. Then he grabbed Charisse by the waist and plopped her squarely next to my mother, her golden ringlets drooping.

A sudden hiss of air from the brakes felt like steaming breath on my legs. I clutched my Barbie closer and squeezed my eyes shut as he heaved me up onto the panting beast. Two large suitcases and a couple of small bags soon followed.

Inside the small, dingy cabin was sweltering hot—crowded with greasy dials, gauges, and buttons. Diesel fumes saturated the air and combined with the heat of the idling engine, it was difficult to breathe. The dirty windshield curving across the front of the cabin revealed no outside details, even when I strained on my tiptoes to see.

The grubby man in overalls pulled on his gloves and boarded behind us, a thick ring of keys jangling on his hip. He leaned out the doorway, waving a signal to the brakeman alongside the length of brick colored boxcars and black tank cars stretching out behind us. "It's best to sit down, ma'am," he yelled over the din even though there were no chairs in sight. My sister and I sat on the vibrating metal floor, hopping up instantly. It was as hot as a frying pan on our bare legs.

"Wait," my mother mouthed to me. She situated the suitcases in the center of the engine floor and sat modestly, uncomfortably, on one large suitcase, pulling her dress down to cover her knees. She gripped Tommy tightly into her lap. Charisse clung to one of her arms, whining and wedging herself as close to her as she could while I straddled the end of the other suitcase like a horse. The engineer threw the throttle and eased the beast forward.

After adjusting a few dials, he yelled, "Just comin' fer a visit or plannin' on stayin' awhile?" The question hung in the air for a moment. I wasn't even sure of the answer.

“No, we are just visiting,” my mother said coolly, taking the time to emphasize each syllable including the “ing” in visiting.

Slowly the train lumbered out of the yard, the cars rocking slightly from side to side. It paused a short distance down the tracks allowing the brakeman to throw the switch to put us back on the mainline. The engineer let us one by one pull the whistle as we gained momentum. Its shriek was deafening.

Not only were there no chairs, the doors were left wide open on either side of the cabin. The effect was a feeling of precariousness balanced by a center of gravity produced by the weight of the engine. It was both thrilling and terrifying.

Balancing myself on the suitcase, I shaped my Barbie’s short blonde hair properly. Barbie’s poise and sophistication, even her dress reminded me of my mother. Like Barbie, my mother’s make-up was always done and her hair neat. I rarely saw my mother in anything but a dress, nylon stockings and pumps, even when she cleaned the house.

Thinking about Barbie reminded me of the day a big had truck pulled up, and all our dolls and toys packed in a box—had been taken by the Goodwill man.

Tommy soon fell asleep to rhythmic clackety-clack of the steel wheels as they hit the track seams. The countryside digressed—a few scattered wooden houses, stockyards, grain elevators, pastures, cattle, horses and then nothing, just the flat, unbounded horizon juxtaposed to the blazing, endless, blue sky.

It was nothing like Eugene, a town we had called home for the two years my father had been in graduate school. We had lived in an ordered grid located at the edge of the University of Oregon campus. It had been composed of several blocks that included my house, my school and playground, the other university campus buildings, and the corner store. As far as I knew, nothing beyond that existed. Nothing like this anyway. What I was seeing outside the doors of

the engine was an unfathomable, undivided vastness, not chopped up by sidewalks, telephone wires and city skyline. It was overwhelming.

The engineer seemed to notice my awe, “That’s why they call it ‘big sky’ country,” he boomed. “Goes on forever.” Then he swiped his arm towards the spinning landscape of a rippling green and khaki ocean. “But some call it the ‘big empty.’ If the rattlesnakes, dust, drought, flash floods, and blizzards don’t get ya, the loneliness will.”

My mother didn’t smile, maybe because she knew we were on our way to one of hundreds of railroad towns that had sprung up along the railroad lines that crisscrossed the plains of Eastern Montana. She was more than familiar with these huddles of civilization that marked the plains with their massive silver grain silos. Even though the town we were headed to was a crossroads of agricultural commerce and westward expansion, Denton wasn’t even a dot on the world atlas. In 1962, it supported three bars, hardware and feed store, a Five & Dime, a grocery store, a truck stop café where my grandmother waited tables, a school, grades K-12, a bank, and a train depot.

I think of her that day, wearing her cultivated urban polish like a suit of armor as she huddled with her three young children in the center of the filthy freight engine. She was barely more than a child herself, almost twenty-four. That day, she was sitting on everything she owned in the world and must have felt like the last anchor of her calm and the last thread of her dignity was slipping away. Though the freight train was hurtling us forwards, it was sending her backwards in time to her past, of a life of transience and poverty. Gone was her hope, her life as the wife of a future professor. Broke and humiliated she was returning to a family who were none to eager to embrace a grown daughter and all her misbegotten baggage.

CHAPTER 6

Ivory Snow & Clorox

Just a few feet from the tracks, my grandmother stood nervously, puffing on a cigarette in front of a sagging wooden structure with peeling orange paint. The house was surrounded by a fenced, neatly trimmed yard of brown grass dotted with patches of green. A sprinkler twirled thin jets of water in one corner and several bushes were heavy with fragrant purple lilacs and white flowers that looked like snowballs. Violet pansies bordered sunken wooden sidewalk and clusters of long-stalked gladiolas, daffodils and irises rimmed the house. At one corner, was a lush stand of rhubarb and beside the house, a vegetable garden with tomatoes and corn. A wringer washer pumped away in a nearby shed. Next to it, a large tin washtub full of soapy water and a washboard. I noticed a strong smell that I would from then on always associate with my grandmother, of Ivory Snow and Clorox.

An older girl in a teased hairdo, her mouth smacking bubblegum, stood next to Grandma as we struggled off the engine, her arms crossed over her chest. Clinging to my grandmother's cotton floral print dress was a chubby, strawberry blonde, freckle-faced boy with a couple of missing teeth. The two kids turned out to be my mother's sister and brother making them my Aunt Georgia and Uncle John. Georgia was twelve but looked older. John was one year younger than me. The last time I had seen John, he had been all decked out in a "Have Gun Will Travel" outfit complete with silver six guns. I hoped he still had them.

There was a brush of hugs and kisses and my grandmother seemed happy to see us though she continued to puff nervously on a cigarette, emitting a sigh between inhales that sounded more like a groan.

She directed the engineer, who had gotten off to help us with our luggage, to a rundown building, a bunkhouse with similar orange peeling paint. It was used for railroad crews in the

summer and being presently empty was where we would sleep. Behind that was another sagging structure which, to my dismay, was where my mother pointed when I told her I had to pee.

“I’ll show you,” John giggled as he ran, his arms and legs seeming to travel in four different directions. The smell was noxious, flies everywhere. Inside, a square wooden box with a big round hole cut out. I looked in it and saw that it dropped directly into a deep, yawning cavern beneath. There was a hole in the side of the outhouse where light filtered in. As my eyes adjusted, I could see piles of dark wet lumps laced with toilet paper. I gagged.

“PU, disgusting,” I yelled. “Is this the only bathroom you have?”

“Yup, unless you want to pee in the pot inside.” John giggled into his hand.

“Is it a bathroom?”

“Nope,” he said with his toothless smile. “Just a pot,” he said into his hand.

Reluctantly, I closed the door and pushed the latch into the eyehook. There were holes in the door. I watched them suspiciously in case John was peeking.

Carefully, I pulled down my shorts and underwear. Sitting on the very edge of the hole, I suddenly considered the possibility of something living in that horrible cavern below, something that could reach up swiftly and pull me in. My imagination became so overpowering that, sure some awful monster was just inches from my butt, I yanked up my shorts midstream—popped the latch, and burst into the sunlight breathing hard, my wet underwear wadded between my legs.

“You go?” John asked.

“Yeah. Is there anything in there, like animals or anything?” I asked my uncle.

“Yeah, rat’lers, rats, sometimes a weasel, or a chicken goes in there.” When he said weasel, it sounded like “weethel.”

“A weethel? What’s a weethel?”

“They’re real cute, furry with long tails. They won’t bite ya if you leave ‘em alone. Hey, let’s go climb the haystack. Last one there’s a rotten egg,” he said giggling again. I noticed his eyebrows and eyelashes were the same strawberry color of his hair.

“First one there eats it,” I called as I waved to my mother to let her know I was going with John. She and Grandma were talking with the engineer in the yard. She nudged Charisse and Tommy towards me. “Watch them,” she said.

The four of us ran screaming and laughing across the wide, deep gully that ran behind the house and over a wooden plank stretched across a brown trickle of water running through the cracked mud. On the other side, brown, white, and spotted chickens were everywhere clucking and pecking at the ground. We stopped at the chicken house. Tommy scrambled to the fence to get into the chicken yard. Charisse and I grabbed him around the waist and wrestled him to the ground.

“Chickens, Tommy, chickens—brk, brk, brk,” I clucked holding him in place.

“Dickens, dickens—bk, bk, bk.” He pointed his stubby finger through the fence and stomped his feet.

“You have rabbits?” I asked spying two big, fuzzy balls of fur in a wire cage.

“Yup,” he said. Inside were two very large rabbits, one white and one brown, both with big floppy ears.

“Can we hold ‘em?” I pleaded.

“Nope,” came another voice cracking gum and sneering from behind us. It was Georgia. “Those are my rabbits. Nobody touches ‘em unless I say.” Her face turned into a pout as she stuck her lower lip and her well-developed chest towards us, her nose in the air.

“Are not,” said John as she slugged him in the shoulder. He clutched his arm laughing and ducked away.

“How old are you?” she asked me, narrowing her eyes.

“Eight, almost.” I said almost afraid to answer.

“I’m twelve. I have a record player and three Elvis Presley forty-fives.”

“Oh,” I said, not knowing who Elvis Presley was.

“Yeah, I can twist. It’s good for your waist,” she said putting her hands on hers to show me.

“Can you twist?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Come on let’s go climb the haystack, they just bucked it,” John yelled running towards it. Relieved at the excuse to get away from Georgia’s interrogation, I ran after him. Georgia followed.

Not far from the chicken house, bales of fresh cut green hay were stacked higher than the house. We all ran around it looking for a way up.

“Here,” John yelled. On one side, a few bales were missing, making a perfect staircase. John and Georgia leaped up easily to the top while I struggled with Charisse and Tommy, their legs too short. Charisse whined that the hay was sticking her. Tommy wanted to fly off the steps like a bird. Georgia came halfway back and pulled Tommy up the rest of the way while I pushed Charisse from behind.

When we all made it to the top, the sweet scent of fresh cut hay was thick and heady. Above us, the spectacle of a crisp blue vista dotted with ripe, bustling thunderheads—strings of cotton candy clouds streaming above that.

“Is it going to rain?” I asked seeing the clouds and thinking of Eugene where it rained almost every day.

Georgia looked at me scornfully. “It doesn’t rain out here, dummy.” We lay on our backs, watching the clouds drift and transform. “Look, Supercar,” I teased Tommy pointing to a cloud that looked like his favorite cartoon character’s flying car.

“Duptar, duptar,” he whined as he stretched his baby arms as if he could grab it.

I stood up after awhile and drank in the view—rolling miles of ripening grain sticking out of rich, black dirt. Wheat, I had heard the engineer say. I could see the dusty road that ran in front of the house and alongside the tracks, one way to the empty stockyard and grain elevators, the other way, over the railroad tracks to the depot, eventually winding into town. A distant Denton, a town I had not yet seen, withered in a mirage of evaporating water.

Eventually, the sun turned into an enormous orange ball as it began to drop in the West. The fading light falling on the tracks made two gleaming ribbons that seemed to run into the setting sun. They led to my father in Eugene. If I started walking towards the sun, following the tracks, I would end up back home. Then I remembered the house was empty and my father was gone—where? For a moment, I felt an ache in my chest, a yearning after something lost. I thought of my friends Diane, Bobby, Arthur, my second grade teacher, Mrs. Mafli, my cat Fishmouth, my father. As the ache grew, it occurred to me that if I didn’t ever forget them, they would always be with me. “I will never forget anyone or anything.” I said to myself, squeezing my eyes shut as if that would hold them all in there. Already my eight short years were stretching out behind me.

“Hey, you wanna go fishin’? Mom don’ like us goin’ to the trestle, but I can make a pole an’ we can dig up some big, fat worms,” John whispered in my ear so Georgia wouldn’t hear—his eyes sparkling as blue as the sky behind him.

“Yeah,” I said grinning.

Bathtime

Fill the stove with coal.
Light the fire.
Stoke the fire 'til it is roaring.
Prime the pump.
Pump the water into pans.
Put the pans on the stove to boil.
Put the big tin washtub in the middle of the kitchen floor.
Pour the boiling water in the washtub.
Let it cool a little.
Grab the baby.
Hold him in the tub with one hand.
Squirm and cry.
With the other,
Scrub, scrub, scrub with Ivory soap,
his little tanned back, his hair and his feet.
The two tow-headed girls are next,
Squeeze 'em in.
Side by side.
Scrub, stand, and rinse
with a bucket of warm water.
Then comes the freckle-faced boy,
Scrub, stand, and rinse.
Next the girl, nearly grown.
Leave the room. "Don't peek."
The water's murky and cool.
Scrape the hard water scum.
Add more hot water
Here comes Dad, just in from a long day.
Fold his tall body into the washtub.
Scrub his white back, tanned neck and forearms,
and his pale bald head.
Rinse with clean water.
The scum is gray grease
Thick as cream on fresh milk.
Scoop the dirty, dirty water from the tub with a bucket.
Pour it down the drain.
Scoop again and again,
'til the washtub is empty.
Drag the tub outside.
Rinse out the silt.
Turn it over to dry.
Bath time's done.

CHAPTER 7

A Sketch

My grandmother, thin in her white waitress uniform, leans against the milkshake machine. One arm across her waist, the other is poised with a cigarette just like the movie stars I have seen on television. The trembling of her hand as she brings the cigarette to her mouth seems to send an instant message to her lips. They pucker slightly in anticipation, even before the filter makes contact. Quivering, they press together and pull a hard drag. Though the cigarette is nearly burned to the filter, a long cylinder of ash hangs on.

Her baubles fascinate me. Large, shiny clip-on earrings dangle from her ears, rings lock reddened, arthritic fingers on hands that during the few weeks since my arrival, have scrubbed, lifted, squeezed, carried, washed, and plunged into boiling water and cleaning chemicals without a thought of rubber gloves. Bangle bracelets jingle and slide around on her arms as she ignites her next cigarette with the smoldering butt of the last one. Every few minutes—she moans—a short, inside-out moan, barely audible.

”So, Sis, what are you going to do now?” She says to my mother forcing the smoke out quickly through her nose and mouth.

I like the sound of “Sis” and the way it feels as it escapes between my tongue, the roof of my mouth and rushes up under my two front teeth. I see how hearing it warms my mother’s face. Not like when my father calls her by her middle name, June. It comes out of his mouth hard and stilted, like a drill sergeant barking an order.

I think I would like to call her “Sis” too.

My mother sighs at the question and turns to me. I am sitting next to her on the tall café counter chairs with sister, my brother and my uncle who is one year younger than me. We are

all sipping pop except for Tommy who is sucking air and drops of root beer from the bottom of his glass loudly. Shrugging, she stares past us, and out of the nicotine yellow café curtains.

Outside them is the smallest town I have ever seen. It begins and ends along the short line of downtown storefronts—nothing but wheat fields before and after that. The café where my grandmother works serves the farmers and ranchers who come to town for supplies and the railroad crews and truckers passing through.

My mother and grandmother talk in hushed tones as truck drivers and farmers stare at them when they come in for lunch. My mother's lost weight since we left Eugene. She is beautiful with her creamy skin, soft brown hair brushing her cheeks and large, clear Scandinavian blue eyes. She is especially beautiful today, with a scarf tied at her throat and a touch of lipstick. I think she looks just like a movie star.

Perking up under the scrutiny of their eyes, she lowers her eyelids and shows two rows of perfect white teeth. My grandmother perks up too, a flash of color to her worn demeanor. She nods to them, poses her cigarette coyly over her shoulder, and smiles.

None of them can believe my mother is the mother of three. They smirk and nudge each other when they realize she's a divorcee.

"You know what they say about divorcees?" I had heard right after Uncle Sonny saved us one night with his .22. He shot it at the rear end of a car kicking up dust as it fishtailed on the dirt road that ran in front of the bunkhouse. My mother, sister, brother and me had been asleep inside. I had heard yelling and laughter from the car through the thin walls, my uncle yelling and swearing, and then the crack of bullets. Through the window, I saw a couple of brown bottles spinning from the cloud of dust and the red points of tail lights disappearing towards town.

“Don’t tell anyone at school I’m divorced,” my mother had said later without explanation. Her request added reality to the possibility that they’d come back and hurt us but I didn’t tell her my fears. Uncle Sonny would surely save us again with this .22.

“My father’s in Eugene but he’s coming to get us soon,” I had lied to a girl in the school bathroom while the water ran over and over my hands.

My mother spells some words to my grandmother. They don’t seem to realize it yet, but I can spell well enough to read between the lines. It’s about my father. He is s-l-e-e-p-i-n-g with another w-o-m-a-n. I guess this is the real reason we have come to live with my grandmother and grandfather, instead of an earlier explanation, “we don’t get along any more.” That had never seemed quite true anyway because I couldn’t recall a time when they did.

I try to imagine my father sleeping with another woman. I see two heads on pillows and bodies making dips and valleys in the blankets. The faces are buried in morning shadows. My father snores loudly, his mouth hanging open, his hairy beer belly rising and falling with each breath. It doesn’t seem nasty. I wonder what the woman looks like and if she’s as pretty as my mother.

“So what are you gonna do now, Sis?” My grandmother asks again.

“I don’t know,” Sis replies. “Maybe get a job as a waitress?”

My grandmother listens nervously, sucking silence from her cigarette and staring out of the dim windows. Her thick pancake makeup isn’t able to fill in the furrowed cracks of exhaustion. Even the bright rouge, heavy black eyeliner, eyebrows penciled in where the real ones have been plucked clean, and the gash of bright red lipstick fails to resurrect a youthful blush even though she is still a young woman.

Maybe she’s thinking about the Great Depression. She had to eat “dog gravy,” a mix of water and flour poured over bread, because there was no food. Maybe she’s thinking about cooking that for supper tonight now that she has four more mouths to feed added to the six she

already has. Or maybe, she's thinking my mother should've stayed with my father no matter what because this is as good as it gets. She lights another cigarette and lets a tiny moan slip out.

CHAPTER 8

Harvest

The Roadmaster's kids were the meanest I'd ever met. I suppose their father being my grandfather's boss gave them the idea they had some kind of power over us. And maybe we should have been a little more beholdng, considering the fact that it was only by the Roadmaster's good will that my mother, my sister, brother and I had been allowed to move into the bunkhouse for the summer.

One day soon after we got there, John, Charisse and I decided to walk towards the depot to check out the Roadmaster's kids. On the way, we passed Tommy, tied to the clothesline in the back yard. Whenever my mother was gone, Tommy gave Grandma fits because he'd do things like wander into the ditch or off into the wheat fields. So she tied him to the clothesline in such a way that he could move from one end of it to the other. He looked sad as he watched us walk by, his little round face brown from the sun, his hair practically white. He was covered in dirt. He held his stubby arms out to me like he did when he wanted me to take him, which made me feel a big sisterly pang of sympathy.

I opened the gate, unhooked him and grabbed his sweaty hand, leading him out to the road.

The Roadmaster had four kids and three of them were walking towards us from the depot. The first one I noticed was about my age. He had a large, ugly head and a permanent sneer on his face. There was a younger girl and boy about Tommy's age.

"Where do you think you're goin'?" The boy with the large head asked.

"We're taking a walk, what do you think." John sneered back.

"Yeah, you're on my property and you're not allowed."

"It's not your property, it belongs to the Milwaukee Road," John answered.

“Who are those guys, more dumb Hildahls?” The ugly boy said pointing to us.

“We’re not Hildahls, we’re Mongars,” I said, as if that would make a difference.

“Well, Hildahls are dumb as the hills,” the ugly boy said, laughing at his own humor.

“I know you are but what am I?” John shot back in a singsong voice.

The ugly boy shot back more insults.

“I know you are but what am I, I know you are but what am I, I know you are but what am I? ”John sang to each additional one.

I had never been too good with this confrontation game. The last time some boys had challenged me was in Eugene. I was in front of the candy store on my bicycle. They told me to give them my money and I did, a dime. I didn’t know what to do at this point except what I had done then, turn around and go home as fast as my feet could carry me.

Then the littlest of the Roadmaster’s kids, a chubbier version of his ugly older brother, pushed Tommy hard. Tommy pushed him back and put up his fists instantly. The other boy leaped on him and before I knew it, the two were rolling and rolling in the dust. Then the kid bit Tommy’s ear. Tommy didn’t cry though, just punched the kid in the head.

The Roadmaster’s kids were laughing. As the oldest, I should have stopped it. But I didn’t do anything because I was frozen in place, frozen like I always was when people started hitting and yelling. I was used to watching Tommy get it anyway. In fact, I was even laughing, into my hand, shrugging my shoulders, as if I was sharing a joke with the Roadmaster’s kids. It was a ruse of course because I wanted to haul off and run like hell. Then a voice behind jolted me back.

“Get lost you morons and go back where you came from.” Georgia stomped into the circle, and yanked Tommy out of the dirt by his suspenders. In no time, the Roadmaster’s kids were in retreat, pitching rocks at us from a safe distance.

“That kid’s gonna be in your class this year, you know.” Georgia said to me.

“What kid?” I asked.

“The one with the big ugly head,” she said as we passed the corner of our fenced yard, home safe again.

When we got there, we soon heard a commotion in the backyard. Grandma was standing in front of a stump with a hatchet in her hand. There was blood on her apron and feathers all around her.

We watched as she fixed a chicken by its neck to the stump, swung the hatchet up over her head and then brought it down on the neck of the chicken with a thwack. Amazingly, the chicken wasn’t connected to the stump anymore, nor was it connected to its head. The chicken didn’t know it didn’t have a head anymore, flying for a few feet, dropping to the ground and flapping its wings crazily. It seemed so comical I had the urge to laugh but the urge stopped dead in my throat when I realized what was really happening and saw Grandma’s face.

It was more her lack of expression that hit me, and the cold determination in her arm as metal bit wood again and again. She moved like a machine, swing, chop, bow, sweep the decapitated head into the ditch with a flick of her wrist. Swing, chop, bow, flick again and again.

She didn’t even notice us as she grabbed the flopping bodies by the legs and carried them into the house, a trail of blood behind her. Later, the kitchen was a bloodbath of entrails, feathers, and bloody flesh—her in the center of it—ripping, skinning, gutting, and breaking bones.

* * *

“Tickle my back,” Georgia demanded. She had turned to the wall, lifting her pajama top, her bare back crisscrossed by a frayed white brassiere. I lightly touched her skin feeling its oiliness and small bumps. Pimples, she had told me. Everyone gets them when they become a

teenager, she had said. Though the sensation wasn't pleasant, I wasn't sleepy yet and it was the only way I was going to get a story out of her.

I had won this privileged position because I had made her like me, at least momentarily. Just before we had gone to bed, she was playing her Elvis forty-fives. At twelve, she had already graduated to a C cup, she had bragged to me one day. With her tight jeans and teased up hair do, she looked to me like she had just walked out of "Blue Hawaii," an Elvis Presley movie I had seen at the drive-in. I had told her so, which to my surprise, had won me a point or two.

Then while she was twisting and singing, she had screwed her face into such a pained expression, that she looked just like Elvis. I told her that too, which had not only won me a reprieve from the usual—knuckles slamming into my skinny arms anytime she felt like it—but included an invitation to sleep in her bed.

My mother was gone to the Seattle World's Fair with a "friend," she had told me as she packed a suitcase and kissed me good-bye a few days earlier. Sonny and Bev were gone too, moved out temporarily. My Grandmother, rather than leave us in the bunkhouse unsupervised, had set us kids up in the main house, in the second bedroom with Georgia and John. At least now that I would share the bed with Georgia, I didn't have to cram into the other single bed with John and my brother and sister.

"That's not tickling," she complained. I adjusted my technique thinking she might slug me or worse yet, not follow through with her promise.

"There once was a man with a golden arm," she began.

I shivered in eager anticipation.

"No one knew he had a golden arm, until one day he met this beautiful woman. They fell in love and soon were married. On their wedding night..." her voice began to fade. I gently nudged her.

“Keep tickling, I’m not asleep,” she commanded.

I concentrated harder, raising goose bumps on her back as she continued with the story. When the story came to a climax, she knocked slowly and loudly on the wall. Event though I knew it was coming, I was startled anyway.

“Give me back my golden arm,” she wailed.

Knock. Knock. Knock, she hit the wall with her knuckles.

“Give me back my golden arm,” she repeated several more times, a few decibels higher.

And finally, the punch line, “Take it!” Almost instantly, she was snoring, but I was still shaking from the story which had brought random noises in the night into excruciating focus. They kept me awake for a long time.

I woke up to her crawling over me. Dawn was breaking through the bedroom windows. When I saw her pulling on her cowboy boots, I hopped out of bed.

“Can I go?” I begged.

“Nope.”

“Ple-e-e-e-ease?”

“Nope.”

“I’ll tickle your back for a week,” I bargained.

“OK,” she shrugged her shoulders after a moment. “But you better not spook him or else.” She balled her fist in my face as a reminder.

Quickly I dressed, following her out of the house to the shed, where she told me to hold a rusty bucket while she scooped in the oats. She pulled a few inches of hay off the end of a bale that I told her looked like a hay cake. She didn’t take jokes the way John did. Ignoring my comment, she commanded me to carry the bucket and the hay cake. She grabbed the bridle off the wall and what looked like a saddle blanket but with cinches. I followed her eagerly, imagin-

ing I was walking beside National Velvet and we were going to get her horse, Sonny Boy, ready for a big race. We walked down the dusty road to the makeshift corral and lean to.

Sonny Boy stomped and snorted just as soon as Georgia was in sight. He was a beautiful roan quarter horse with a butched mane and a wire brush tail. I hadn't been allowed anywhere near him since Uncle Leo had dropped him off a couple of months earlier. Uncle Leo, who wasn't really an uncle, had a ranch up at Sweetgrass and as soon as Sonny Boy was weaned from his mother, he had brought him down, as a present for Georgia.

Sonny Boy was halter-broke, which allowed her to exercise him, but still too green for the saddle. That was what the bridle and the blanket she cinched on him was for, to get him used to the idea. Her dream was to show him at the fair and ride him in the annual parade. That was still a couple of years away, but she could wait.

The first thing Georgia did, after she slipped off his halter and buckled on his bridle, was to fish in her pocket and pull out some sugar cubes. The sugar was a distraction to keep him from gnawing too much on the bit. Holding her hand flat, she allowed Sonny's velvety mouth to nuzzle the sugar off.

"Can I, Can I," I begged. She handed me a cube of sugar.

"Careful, or he'll bite your fingers off." As soon as she said it, I let the cube drop and jumped back. The horse shied.

"Easy, easy," she calmed him, patting his shoulder and keeping the reins short and taut.

Forgetting I was there, she talked to him softly, scratching his ears, while she tied him to the post. She mounted the blanket and cinched it. Then she led him out of the corral, taking him for a long walk along a road that ran next to the railroad tracks. I ran next to her, trying to keep up.

When we got back, she curried and brushed him, fed him his oats and filled his water trough. After we unloaded everything in the shed we went by the aviary she had created on the

back porch where she was nursing two pigeons, wounded by cats. After we fed her rabbits, we headed in for breakfast.

“Can I go tomorrow?” I asked her as she pulled off her boots at the back door. She scowled at me and slugged me in the arm with her knuckles as she walked by.

* * *

Wheat harvest signaled an end to summer, the honey-colored fields suddenly full of huge threshers. Trucks lined up at grain elevators and then extra freight trains passing through loaded the grain into tankers. The air was thick with chaff and dust that settled on everything outside and inside the house. This put Grandma into an extra cleaning frenzy, trying to keep up with it.

Cattle showed up too at the stockyards, waiting to be shipped to slaughterhouses. This gave rise to flies and the stench of manure when the wind was blowing just right. John, Charisse and I would hang out there sometimes, picking out bulls that we would ride, just like Uncle Sonny did in the rodeo. On the way home, we’d walk by the grain elevators, small drifts of grain all around that had fallen from the chutes, or off the tank cars and trucks. I’d pick up a handful and chew it all the way home.

Somehow, I didn’t really notice the stench or the dust, just the days that seemed to stretch on gloriously. School started late in wheat country. Most of the students were offspring of farmers and ranchers and had to help their families with harvest.

The three of us took advantage of those long days, hunting rattlesnakes, building forts, fishing though there wasn’t but a trickle of brown water flowing under the trestle.

Once harvest was past, the wheat fields took on a new character. Instead of miles of golden velvet, they turned into miles of yellow stubble sticking out of the blackest dirt I'd ever seen. A sweet smell rose from it as soon as the farmers turned the fields, getting them ready for the next seeding.

The harvested fields had changed the landscape so dramatically that one day I decided to start walking across them to see where they went and what else was out there.

I walked and walked until the sounds from town and the highway seemed muffled. Eventually I couldn't see anything around me but identical low rolling waves of black loam. The smell was so overwhelmingly sweet, I scooped up a dark handful to taste it. It was sweet, like the raw grain that fell by the elevator.

Suddenly I realized that I had no idea where I was or even how to get home. There were no landmarks at all, just identical prairie stretching out in every direction, a big sky yawning over me. I yelled "hey" to see if anyone was near but my voice stopped a few feet in front of me. I felt a surge of panic realizing that I could easily die out here and never be found. With that thought, I immediately turned around and somehow managed to retrace my steps, finding my way back to the little house with orange peeling paint that I had begun to call home.

* * *

School finally started, and sure enough, the Roadmaster's kid was in my class. He made me know it too, by walking close to my desk and sneering insults at me when the teacher wasn't looking. I didn't make any friends either, maybe because of him. I don't think I ever suffered over it. John and Charisse were all the friends I needed at recess and after school.

Other than that, school was unremarkable. What I do remember was that the good weather gave us an extended summer, meaning when we got home from school, there were still hours and hours of daylight to play.

Nights during that long summer were less pleasant because we mainly slept in the bunkhouse. It was a similarly run down building next to the main house, with peeling orange paint and sagging floors. It was used bunk railroad crews that came to repair the track after the ground had thawed. Before we arrived, my grandmother had used it for storage. To accommodate us, she had laid two large, stained, lumpy mattresses onto a pair of squeaky bedsprings, squeezing them in between stacks of dusty cardboard boxes and furniture. She had also given us a kerosene lantern for light because there was no electricity.

As the Indian summer waned, I read and did homework by the dim lantern and later while waiting to fall asleep, entertained Tommy and Charisse with shadow games. It took some getting used to, living just feet from the mainline. When the freight trains roared by at a hundred or more miles an hour, the windows seemed as if they would rattle right out of their frames and the nails would shake right out of the walls and floors, leaving us in the rubble. Just before they hit the crossroads by the depot, their whistles would shriek and echoing across the empty prairie. Tommy and Charisse would huddle against me, Tommy sucking his thumb and twirling his finger tighter and tighter until it hurt.

I often had trouble falling asleep there, my mother frequently out late somewhere. Those nights the flame from the kerosene lamp threw flickering shadows amongst the stacked furniture and boxes. Georgia's scary stories didn't help either, making me think that the rustling from different shadows of the room, and the intermittent groaning and creaking was surely the man trying to get back his golden arm. Mice and old wood, or so my mother had said when I told her.

* * *

Grandpa and Uncle Sonny got home from work just about the time the school bus dropped us off. The first thing they'd do was take off their hardhats and greasy jackets and grab a Miller beer. Grandpa was a big man, his voice low and rumbling. But Uncle Sonny wore glasses and took after Grandma, short and wiry. He also had long, deep furrows on either side of a mouth that were always grinning, reminding me of Howdy Doody. He was jittery like Grandma and chain-smoked too. He was only eighteen, but he seemed like an adult to us.

With their hardhats off, both men's faces were nut brown from about their eyebrows down. Above that, Sonny was pink and Grandpa was white. The two-tone effect wasn't as dramatic on Sonny who still had thick, dark hair, but Grandpa was completely bald, making half of his head look like the shiny top of a boiled egg.

"Dad, come on. Let's rattle," John called giggling. Grandpa got up from where he was sitting with a big grin on his face, revealing a bottom row of stained teeth that had worn down into spikes. He didn't smile often, not because he was a solemn man but because he was self-conscious of his teeth.

Grandpa grabbed John by the shoulder and gently rolled him to the ground. All his movements were exaggerated, so he wouldn't hurt him. John jumped back up and pulled Grandpa to his knees, which would have been quite a feat if Grandpa wasn't helping. Once Grandpa was down, that was all the rest of us needed to pile on him.

He wrestled with all of us in the grass, rolling us away from him while we giggled like maniacs. At one point, Grandpa grabbed me and then rolled me away from him. When I got up, I felt something wet, a greenish/black liquid stuck to my arm. It was a wad of chewed up snoos that Grandpa had spit on the ground.

When we were almost out of steam, Uncle Sonny shouted, “Come on you guys, lets play ‘Annie, Annie Over.’” We threw the ball back and forth over the house until dinnertime and as soon as it was dark, we were allowed out for a family game of “No Bears Out Tonight.” Even my mother was there and though Grandma didn’t participate, she stood outside watching us and smoking a cigarette.

The front porch was designated home base and Sonny was chosen as the bear. The rest of us huddled, no peaking, on home base, under the only light. Beyond its boundaries was pitch black, illuminated only by a tapestry of stars and a thin piece of the prairie moon.

After counting to one hundred, we eased out of the safety of the porch, repeating “no bears out tonight” in unison while we held each other’s hands or hung onto the nearest adult. The more we repeated the phrase, the deeper into the blackness we strayed, adding to the pitch of our terror. Uncle Sonny was always the best bear, making us wait for him until we were so scared we could have peed our pants. Sure enough, he came roaring from the void, making us scatter, screaming, farther into the blackness and away from home base.

“Got you,” he said as he grabbed me. I giggled with terror and glee all at once.

* * *

Grandma could only drink straight whiskey. Anything else, and she would black out and then pass out, or so she said. Not that I ever saw her drink, except once.

Grandpa and Uncle Sonny were out of town, the house strangely peaceful. Even my mother was there that night, her presence always softening the harshness of our surroundings. She sat with my Grandmother at the kitchen table, talking.

We were supposed to be asleep but I wasn't. I listened to my mother's voice giddy with whiskey. It rose and fell, bits of laughter washing through it, my grandmother's usual monotone weaving in between.

I got up to get water and somehow managed to hang at the edge of the kitchen. They didn't send me back to bed, so I eased my way to the table and slid in next to my mother.

The table was filled with pictures, sepia, black and white and a few of the new Kodak color prints. There was a bottle of Grandpa's Irish whiskey sitting there, with two glasses. My mother sipped daintily on one mixed with Coca-Cola, while my grandmother's glass held just a little of the yellowish liquid in the bottom.

"Looks like Danny Kay, doesn't he?" Grandma said smiling. I strained over my mother's arm to see the photograph she was holding, a young, handsome man. I couldn't believe it was my grandfather.

"How did you meet?" Asked my mother.

Grandma explained that his father worked for the railroad and so did hers. His father's father family had been North Dakota wheat farmers from Norway and his mother's family were Germans named France.

"That wasn't their real name. They changed it during World War I because people were calling people with German blood traitors." Grandma added.

"Is this you?" My mother asked holding another photo in her hand. It looked a lot like Grandma, only younger.

"That was before I met Dan. After I came back from the convent, I went to live with my father. I was dolled up in that one, boy. On my way to a dance. My father beat the livin' day-lights out of me when I came home."

"But why?" My mother asked in a concerned voice.

“He was mean as a snake, a bastard drunken Irishman. He didn’t believe girls should wear make-up or go to dances.”

“Why were you in the convent?”

“Because he killed her, the horny bastard.” Grandma drained her glass and sucked deeply on her cigarette.

“What? Who?” My mother asked.

Grandma searched through the stack until she found a faded sepia photograph. She tossed it to my mother. It was a picture of a young, beautiful, but frail woman lying as if asleep, her long, thick, raven hair fanned about her. She wore a delicately lacy old-fashioned dress. There were flowers all around her. But she wasn’t asleep, she was dead.

“She wasn’t supposed to have any more children. The doctor told my father to stay away from her.” There was no emotion in her voice as she recounted the events.

The only thing Grandma remembered about her mother was her funeral. Her aunts had passed her over her mother’s open coffin several times. She didn’t know why. Her strict aunts raised her until she hit puberty. Then she was sent to a convent where she learned the definition of hard work.

Suddenly Grandma was talking and talking, telling stories, one on top of the other. They were stories I had heard her tell over and over. It was as if she was trying to figure something out, that something would become clearer to her in the telling.

“I wasn’t supposed to have any more after you,” she said to my mother. “I died on the delivery table three times, you know. My heart stopped. They told me I was too small to carry children by a man Dan’s size. But he wouldn’t leave me alone. When I got pregnant for the fourth time with John, I tried to abort him, jumped off the back of the couch over and over, throwing myself onto the floor. Didn’t work,” she said chuckling.

By then, John had sneaked into the kitchen and was sitting beside me. I looked at him to see if he had heard. He just shrugged his shoulders and giggled into his hand as always.

As I looked at all the faces staring up from the table, I felt an eerie sense we weren't alone. There were ghosts in the room, whispering in the dark corners. I looked at my mother's face, smooth and soft. She seemed to not to hear them. I looked into my grandmother's face. I knew that she was hearing them too, her face furrowed by the torment of her stories.

CHAPTER 9

Hibernation

Roosters crowed in the dead of winter and didn't care one bit whether or not the sun was up. I had gotten so used to it that I stopped noticing. Just like I had stopped noticing the shuffle of fuzzy slippers on the bare linoleum floor, and the snap of a lighter followed by the extended bouts of hacking coughs that sometimes came even before the roosters were up.

Other sounds marked the beginning of each day as Grandma scooped coal into the stove, pumped water into the sink and clattered the pots on the stove. She did this with such fervor; it seemed the din was meant to reach the second bedroom where my mother, my baby brother, Georgia, Sonny and his pregnant wife Bev slept.

Soon, the pop of the percolator, the aroma of strong black coffee and sweet bubbling oatmeal.

The large shadow that passed across the doorway blocking the light from the kitchen's only bulb was Grandpa getting ready for work. His low rumbling voice joined intermittently with her high-pitched chirping. The floorboards beneath his boots groaned as he moved back and forth across the kitchen. The sound of a shovel crunching through the snow meant that a frozen wall had covered the doorway during the night. I could always tell when he had broken through it because the icy tendrils of winter would sweep through the kitchen and into the living room where I drowsed, making me burrow deeper into the thick layers of wool and cotton blankets.

None of these sounds would completely wake me from my slumbers. Nor did the the itchy couch Grandma laid out into a double sized bed each night, or even Charisse's and John's restless arms and legs poking me as I slept. It had all become a familiar, cozy comfort that turned out to be a great improvement over our former quarters in the bunkhouse.

Full throttle winter had transformed the uninsulated bunkhouse into a refrigerator and the well-worn pathway from the bunkhouse to my grandmother's house was buried under layers of snow, snow that drifted over the outhouse and up to the roof of the bunkhouse. Many mornings I awoke to miniature snowdrifts in the corners of the room, the wind-driven, fine-powdered snow finding its way through spaces between the boards. A diesel stove in a corner of the room barely fought off the coldest nights, my mother frequently checking it and increasing the flow of diesel to the fire, so much so that one night it began to smoke.

From my dreams, I had heard my mother screaming "fire, fire, fire." Still in our pajamas and rubbing the sleep from our eyes, she had pushed us frantically out the door, suitcases, clothes, toys and schoolbooks airborne behind us as she heaved them into the snow banks. Soon everyone was up from the main house trying to help, long before the volunteer fire department engine had made its way up the ice-encrusted road. The fire department left fairly soon after it had arrived because, ignoring my mother's pleading cries, Uncle Sonny had run into the bunkhouse and disconnected the flow of diesel to the stove before it had blown up and burned the bunkhouse down.

"Rise and shine," Grandma called flatly even though the sun was nowhere in sight. Her body was a blank silhouette in the kitchen doorway and even though I could not see her face, I knew she wasn't smiling or even wondering if we'd had sweet dreams like my mother used to when we lived in Eugene.

"Jo-ohn!" I cried rolling off the couch and stepping onto the icy floor. I shivered as the frigid air hit the wet pajamas clinging to my legs. The sharp odor of ammonia welled up from the damp warmth of blankets. John sat up and looked at me sheepishly, his chubby face in a halo of strawberry blonde curls, his cheeks covered with sprinkles of freckles. I wasn't mad that he wet the bed. But sometime during the night, he had rolled me in the wet spot and had

taken my dry one. Not only did I feel betrayed, I also suspected his action a ploy aimed at making me the guilty one. The first time it happened, I even fell for it, thinking I had peed the bed because of my reluctance to use the porcelain pot in the kitchen. What I couldn't figure out was how I never woke up while he was accomplishing his dastardly deed.

As soon as Grandma heard me scolding John, she was back in the living room, cigarette clamped between her teeth, methodically yanking the blankets and bedding off the couch. Charisse was unceremoniously rolled out of bed and still groggy she stumbled to the armchair and huddled there shivering.

Grandma threw the bedding into a basket that she hauled into the kitchen. The shed that held the washer had completely disappeared under a drift of white and probably wouldn't be seen until first Spring melt which meant she would have to wash them out by hand and hang dry them in the subzero temperatures outside.

Pulling us by the shoulders of our pajama tops, she hurried us into the kitchen, to an icy spit bath at the sink. Wrapped in towels we scurried to the living room where our school clothes were laid out near the diesel heater. Teeth chattering we dressed standing as close as we could to the heater without burning our bare bottoms.

"Hey, Charisse, don't that look just like your teacher," said John pointing to the fringed tapestry on the wall. It was of dogs playing poker. He was pointing to the bulldog.

Charisse giggled. Her teacher had been especially mean to her, sometimes sitting her in the corner of the classroom on a high stool with a dunce cap on, a punishment for daydreaming.

Grandpa said good-bye to us to the sound of the little bird chirping, "cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo," from the clock on the wall that looked like a birdhouse. Grandpa was so tall that my grandmother looked like a child beside him as she handed him a metal lunchbox and a steel thermos of Irish coffee, which I learned years later always contained a healthy dose of Irish

whiskey to ward off the cold. Then he clomped from the house in heavy steel-toed boots, I used to imagine, just like Paul Bunyan.

As soon as he left, and while the echo of the “cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo, “ still hung in the air, Grandma quickly climbed up onto the back of the arm chair that matched the itchy couch to turn the “the damn thing off.” I had learned that little noises like that drove her “nuts” she claimed. If that was true, she’d sure to be in the nuthouse in no time because when Grandpa returned from work in the afternoons, he’d turn it right back on.

As soon as we dressed, we ran to slide into the warmest corner of the house to wait for breakfast, a booth-style kitchen table that was situated right next to the roaring coal stove. Charisse and I fought briefly over who would sit next to John, but we soon compromised, squeezing him between us. It was warmer that way, too.

This corner of the kitchen was lit by the glow of a bare bulb attached to one of the only electrical outlets in the house. A heavy cord from the iron hung from it. The rest of the room remained wrapped in murky shadows, ordered only by the dim outlines of my imagination. In one of the dark spaces was something I didn’t have to imagine, a large white porcelain pot with a handle and lid that served as an indoor toilet. Grandma emptied it once a day. Though I had gotten used to using it, I used it only when absolutely necessary.

Outside us, the wind berated the thin clapboard walls of the section house, forcing fine bits of the powdered snow through the cracks in the walls. It melted quickly when it hit the warm air of the kitchen. We sat in the booth watching the white world swirl outside the window, our legs folded under us to hold in our body heat. Even though the coal stove was blazing, the warmth failed to make it into the cracked and faded linoleum floor.

We were giggling at one of John’s jokes when Charisse piped up with a squeaky “First.”

John joined her, “Second,”

And then me, “Third,” in a sort of barbershop quartet harmony. It was a silly performance we invented the first day of school when we realized that we were each a year apart in school. The second verse was our ages. Charisse was six. John was seven and I was eight.

“Hey, look,” John said with a toothy smile and pointing outside. The empty space where his front teeth had fallen out, was filled by two large teeth that were too big for his mouth. Focusing to where he pointed we could make out the clothesline in the dark. Flapping in the wind was Grandpa’s long johns, frozen stiff. “Hey, looks like Dad’s still in ‘em,” John said giggling. We laughed until our sides hurt.

Eventually Grandma served us bowls of steaming oatmeal, a meal I had come to revere as a sanctuary from the indomitable winter and the fuel that got me to the bus stop every morning. Her face was blank as usual as she moved through the morning routine with emotionless efficiency. I didn’t mind that she didn’t smile or talk to us because she never said, “sit up straight,” or “don’t chew with your mouth open,” or “shut up or I’ll hurt you.” Grandma was all about work and we were just part of it.

She dipped three bowls full and set them on the cheery, red-checkered tablecloth, spooned heaping teaspoonfuls of sugar on to cereal that melted quickly into glazed puddles in the oatmeal valleys. Then she poured fresh whole milk from a gallon jug that she bought several times a week from the farmer down the road. It was thick with cream that cooled the sides of the bowl but not enough to prevent the pats of Oleomargarine from melting, bits of yellow fat in the pure white sea. In the center of the table, she set a high stack of buttered white toast and three big glasses of milk.

John grabbed a piece of toast and blowing a few times on his cereal, scooped a glob onto it. Grabbing another piece, he smashed it together with his chubby hands and took an eager bite.

“A damned Norwegian’ll make a sandwich out of anything,” Uncle Sonny said sleepily as he emerged from the darkness of the living room half-dressed and scratching his belly.

Grandma seemed to come to life, immediately by his side with an ironed work shirt and a cup of coffee saying his name in a soft way. He sat across from us, and lit a cigarette with a shaky hand grinning like always.

“God what a shithole, huh?” He waved his hand through the air. It seemed he was talking to me.

“Yer Mom should’a never come back here. You don’t want to grow up in this shithole do ya?” He laughed and tipped his coffee cup to his mouth.

I shrugged as I drank my milk. John poked me in the side, almost making me spit it out. We had decided that grown-ups never made sense. It didn’t seem so bad here anyway. I had heard my mother complain and was even vaguely aware that the kids in town made fun of our clothes and for living out here. But I had never experienced so much freedom and fun in all of my eight years. I knew it was partly because my father was far away. Though I occasionally felt his absence, I didn’t hope that he would come and get us. My mother too was frequently gone, where no one said. Grandma was just too busy and exhausted to bother with us. The other adults like Sonny and Grandpa didn’t wonder where we were or what we were up to half the time either. The only one who ruined that occasionally was Georgia, who spied and tattled on us every chance she got.

Before we were done, Uncle Sonny’s pregnant wife, Bev, shuffled in. Her hair was up in curlers wrapped in a scarf. She sat by Uncle Sonny, leaned against him and lit a cigarette, looking at us through half-closed lids. Grandma instantly returned to her silent efficiency.

By the time our bellies were full, our bodies were warmed enough to layer on the coats, sweaters, leggings, rubber boots, hats, scarves, and mittens that Grandma had set next to the

diesel stove. By then, Georgia appeared, stamping her feet and shivering, covered with snow from outside where she had just fed and watered her colt.

One by one, Grandma buttoned us up, gave us each a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in a paper bag and sent us out the door into the winter wonderland. By then, dawn had broken across the blaringly white, crystalline snowdrifts that rolled and pitched around us like an endless ocean. The glare stabbed into our eyes, making us stumble, momentarily blinded.

We crunched across the snow, stiff in our layers of clothes like miniature versions of the space men who would one day walk on the moon. Icicles formed in our noses even though we tried to keep the scarves over our faces to warm the air that bit into our lungs. As we trudged to the bus stop, our steps and voices were muffled by the frozen acoustics. Sometimes the snow fell from a white Eastern Montana sky on those mornings in flakes the size of quarters and sometimes it fell in a powder that stung our cheeks and noses red.

Most of the time, the bus was late depending on when they had cleared the roads in town. Sometimes we waited so long that the snow drifted onto our shoulders, sticking to the wool on our backs, forming a thin sheet of ice that turned into puddles on the floor of the bus. It spread under our feet, still frozen inside our rubber boots.

* * *

Grandma actually smiled a few times as Christmas approached and even went all out with a Christmas tree and decorations. Before we opened presents Christmas Eve, my mother brought someone to meet us.

“This is Ben,” my mother said to all of us smiling and looking prettier than I had ever seen her. “He’s an engineer from Guam. He’s building that new freeway through the Rockies.”

Ben's eyes were golden, his face handsomely round and smooth. He spoke softly to us and smiled a lot, his smiles big and warm. He gave all us of Christmas gifts. Mine was a small, pink stuffed dog that held a bottle of lilac toilet water.

I guessed that Ben was the reason I hadn't seen my mother much. I wondered if he was going to be our new father. I hoped so. When I asked her later, she drifted dreamily away. "Maybe," she had said.

After Christmas, temperatures dropped far below zero, the lowest almost ever recorded in Denton history. Along with the hard freeze came a steady sifting of snow that arrived in the form of arctic blizzards that erased any sign of life turning the landscape a frozen wasteland. With school closed, we couldn't even leave the house for days at a time. Just at the point it didn't seem it could get any colder, one night the temperature dropped to forty below.

We huddled near the diesel stove in coats, hats and mittens but even with the coal stove blazing full bore in the kitchen, we still saw our breath. Grandma kept herself warm by ironing in the kitchen.

It was the kind of night I'd heard the men who worked for Grandpa talk about when they sometimes drank beer on the front porch. It was the kind of night that stepping outside the door meant losing all sense of direction, blinding snow erasing landmarks and horizons, so much so that you couldn't even see the end of your arm. It was a night that could take your life.

Georgia's cowboy boots clicked on the floor as she paced the room, arguing with Grandpa in a cracking voice. She wanted to check Sonny Boy, to make sure his hooves weren't frozen and that he was warm enough. Grandpa refused. Finally, she crumpled into the armchair, her arms crossed and a pout on her face. She looked like she might burst into tears but she didn't.

Before we knew it, Uncle Sonny was out the door, a gust of snow sucking what little warmth that was inside. Grandpa called after him, but he had disappeared into the white.

Ten minutes later, Uncle Sonny came back through the door, covered with snow, his nose and cheeks bright red and near frozen. He had found Sonny Boy running loose by the railroad tracks. He had taken him to another shed that gave more shelter and layered a couple of blankets over him, but I could tell that the worried looks meant Sonny Boy might freeze to death.

We had just settled in to huddling near the diesel stove again when there was heavy, sharp banging at the door as if someone were urgently knocking. The first thought was someone lost outside. Grandpa threw open the door to assist the stranger, but instead of a stranger straggling into the living room, we screamed at the apparition looming in the doorway.

It was Sonny Boy turned completely white, coated with thick layers of ice and snow stuck to his hide, icicles hanging from his nose, mouth, and haunches, his eyes wide and crazy as he stomped his hooves in seeming impatience at the doorway. He stepped one foot in and then the other, back and forth, retreating several times, as if unsure of what he was seeing, a strange room full of startled people. Grandpa and Uncle Sonny stepped up to his chest to try to grab his halter to push him back, but the hundreds of pounds of frozen muscle wasn't about to budge.

Then suddenly, we were sharing the living room with the whole horse. In a panic, he tried to turn himself around. We screamed, scuttling across the room, trying to stay out of the way of his hooves.

"He's gonna start buckin.' He's gonna kick the stove over, he's gonna kick the stove," Uncle Sonny screamed. Instantly, I was aware of what that meant, fire and all of us possibly freezing to death outside in the blizzard.

Suddenly Grandma came screaming from the kitchen, brandishing her hot iron up over her head, the cord swinging behind her. Just as Sonny Boy backed up dangerously close to the stove, Grandma lunged at him with the iron. It never made contact. My mother, arms tightly

wrapped around Grandma's waist, pulled her back in the nick of time. Then she rushed Grandma and all the kids to the back bedroom, while Grandpa, Uncle Sonny and Georgia calmed the horse. Somehow, they eased the frozen beast outside and led him to shelter, which offered enough cover to assure he would survive the night.

Sonny Boy survived the winter but as soon as the first thaw came, a strange car and a horse trailer pulled up in front of the house. Then Sonny Boy was loaded into it. Soon, all we could see was the dust the car had raised up on the road as it drove off. Georgia stood in the road, watching until the dust settled and they were long gone.

CHAPTER 10

Liberation

Spring came late because the Groundhog saw his shadow, John had told me. That meant six more weeks of being cooped up. When spring did come, it was a glorious release from the bitter cold and dreary gray. Grey faded to green as the wheat started pushing up and Grandma planted her usual crop of vivid flowers as well as more corn, tomatoes and other vegetables. The ditch filled up with spring melt from the Rockies, chocolate milk colored water that rushed and boiled up the sides of the ditch.

Easter came and we each woke up to colorful baskets of decorated boiled eggs, candy, and to our surprise, live baby chicks colored blue, pink, purple and green. They were peeping like crazy that morning, but too soon, all of them died except mine, which I named Peeper.

Over the next few weeks, Peeper became our official pet. The pink dye had faded to plain white and the chick fattened up fast. When a cockscomb grew prominent, and a long red waddle swung from Peeper's neck, we knew he was a rooster. Everyday after school we ran to the chicken house to see him, giving him feed and picking him up to pet him. That is, until he started getting ornery. Hooks had emerged on the back of his legs and sometimes he would fly at us.

One day, Peeper was nowhere to be found. Frantically, we ran to the other chicken house, the sheds, the haystack, everywhere. Grandma was in the kitchen, spooning large white dollops of Crisco into a frying pan when we ran in breathless to ask if she'd seen him.

"No, haven't seen him today. Maybe a weasel got him, or a snake," she said.

We looked at each other in horror and ran back outside to retrace our steps. The last place we stopped was Grandma's chopping block. Searching around the block and then near the ditch that had abated into a fading stream, we didn't find anything. Undaunted, we searched far-

ther along the ditch past the bunkhouse and far from Grandma's chopping block. It was John who found Peeper's head.

"Are you sure it's Peeper?" I asked him but I knew it was. The head definitely belonged to a rooster and all the roosters in the chicken coop except Peeper were accounted for.

With tears streaming down our faces, we carried the limp head to Grandma. She didn't turn to look at us as we came in the door.

"Is that Peeper you're cooking?" I asked her as the hot oil popped and crackled in the pan around what looked like chicken. "No," she said turning towards us. A disturbed look came over her face at the sight of us crying and the limp head in John's hand. Though she didn't deny killing Peeper, she still insisted that she wasn't cooking him for supper.

When Grandpa came home, we all sat at the table somberly looking at Peeper's fried body arranged on a plate. Grandma served us each a piece and stood near the stove like she always did while we ate.

As soon as I saw Peeper's drumstick on my plate, I couldn't help bursting into tears again. Charisse and John weren't far behind. When Grandpa finally got the explanation he said, "Aw Mom," in the same tone of voice he used when he asked her not to spank us because she might "hurt our little bones." "You shouldn'a gone and killed their pet chicken," he said.

By then no one could eat, not even Grandpa, so Grandma ended up throwing Peeper's parts in the trash. We had a funeral for him after supper, burying his head where no one could find it—far down the ditch and away from Grandma's kitchen.

* * *

One morning I woke up to the slap of the iron on the ironing board. Grandma was ironing, ironing, ironing. The night before, I had heard her crying behind the papery walls of her

bedroom along with occasional thumps. I also heard the low rumblings of my grandfather's voice. I think he was drunk.

In the kitchen, she rubbed the iron over every wrinkle on every sheet, every pillowcase, every rumpled piece of clothing that had been rolled up in her ironing basket, like she was rubbing the life out of them. Even Grandpa's undershirts failed to escape her unrelenting iron.

Her cigarette smoldered in a buckshot bag ashtray while pots of water bubbled vigorously on the coal stove. In one large tin washtub, plaid work shirts and Levis, thick with creosote simmered away. She stirred them occasionally with a stick. Steam was rising from the double sinks, filled with scorching water, alive with dancing Ivory Snow soapsuds. She plunged her hands into the blistering mix over and over, rubbing the fabric vigorously up and down on a wooden washboard. Occasionally she agitated a brimming bucket of whites soaking in Clorox with her reddened hands.

After the clothes were washed, she rinsed them. Georgia and I each took ends of larger items and twisted and twisted them, until the water ran into the big washtub on the floor. The jeans were the hardest for my little hands and scrawny arms to hang on to. There were baskets of wet clothes everywhere. Next they had to be hung on the clothesline.

This took all day, laundry for ten.

CHAPTER 11

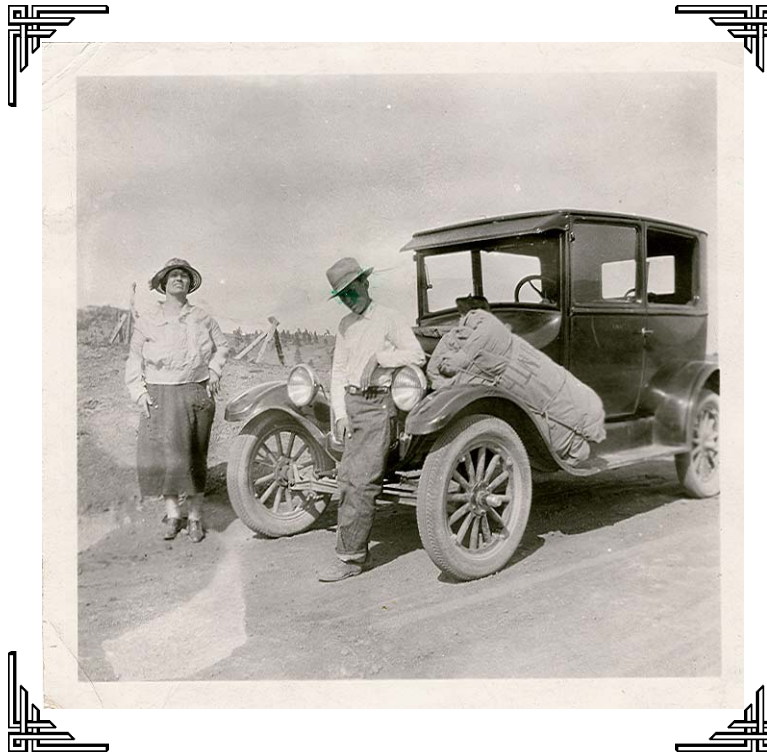
Apparitions

I have a dream. I awaken from my sleep to the dim outlines cast by a kerosene lamp in the bunkhouse. I hear scuffling and crying. I see my father on the other bed. He is sitting on top of my mother's belly, his hands pinning hers to the bed. He spits foul words through his clenched teeth, "You fuckin' whore, slut. You're pregnant. You bitch. You fuckin' bitch. Who's the father?" He jumps on her belly with both of his knees several times. I hear the rusty springs heave beneath his weight. My mother gasps and sobs, "No, Tom, please, stop," she cries over and over.

It is only a nightmare, I tell my dreaming self. I am in Denton, Montana. My father is in Eugene, Oregon—a thousand miles away. My dreaming self closes her eyes and goes back to sleep, ignoring the sounds she hears coming from the other bed.

The next morning my father's head is next my mother's in the bed next to me. I hurriedly dress and run to the main house where I hear the grownups discussing the fact that my mother, brother, sister and me will be leaving for Eugene with my father the next day. John and I look at each other. He shrugs and grins. "Let's go fishin'," he says.

We sneak into Grandma's sewing basket and steal two safety pins, find two long thin branches and some twine. We dig up worms near the flooded ditch. When we get to the trestle, it is a torrent of foaming, brown water rushing under it, an occasional uprooted tree floating by. The bank and the large rocks we usually sit on are under water. We can't even get close enough to put our lines in the water. So we just sit and watch the dark water churn past us.



Missoula

1959

The Bear Went Over the Mountain

The bear went over the mountain
The bear went over the mountain
The bear went over the mountain
And what do you think he saw?

He saw another mountain
He saw another mountain
He saw another mountain
And what do you think he did?

He climbed the other mountain
He climbed the other mountain
He climbed the other mountain
And what do you think he saw?

He saw another mountain...

My mother's version of a children's camp song

CHAPTER 12

The “M” Mountain

The morning’s oatmeal with toast had long since passed and it had been hours since her mother told her and her sister to go outside and play. She imagined a ketchup sandwich or sugar bread, made with a slice of soft, doughy Wonder Bread with lots of sugar sprinkled on top, or a nice cold glass of grape Kool-Aid in her favorite shiny red metal cup that stayed cold in her hand even on hot days.

She didn’t know how long she had been knocking at the door and calling her mother. She did know the door was locked and some days her mother would answer and some days, she wouldn’t. Some days, her father would answer with the threat of the black-bristled, herringbone hairbrush across her butt. Some days, her sister was with her knocking. Other days, she heard voices yelling from behind the locked door, making her decide to come back later.

She didn’t know about her brother Tommy in her mother’s belly growing bigger and bigger, or that her mother stood on her feet all day at the Missoula Mercantile selling clothes to women who didn’t have to shop the Sears catalog. She didn’t know her mother was supporting her, her three-year-old sister, Charisse, and her father while he studied at the university on the GI Bill and that her mother wasn’t answering the door because she was probably taking a nap.

It was high summer and this brown dusty town she lived in was called Missoula. But she didn’t know that, or that her apartment was in the married student housing building on the University of Montana campus. But she could count her age on the five fingers of her hand and she could feel what the town was feeling through the light sear of radiation across her freckled nose and the dryness in her throat—another summer’s day set on slow bake.

The effect was pervasive across the backdrop of her world. From the freeway, the town appeared like an oasis of slightly greened neighborhoods tucked into a soft surge of foothills

upholstered in golden, deep nap corduroy. But in town, the aesthetic of corduroy wore thin amidst the tarry asphalt streets that cleaved cow town, to railroad town, to college town. Insects waxed, flies swarmed, a subtle undertow of white noise. Even the Clark Fork River had become a crooked muddy gash dividing the town.

She did know her name was Sonja, as well as the sources of different scabs on her knees if anyone'd asked. And even if nobody knew who the little girl was standing in the breezeway, she would have recognized herself instantly—even through the layer of red clay on her small round face that coated her clothes and even the two thin tow-headed braids that never seemed to hang straight.

It was the braids that made her different from her sister, even though people thought her and her younger sister were twins. Though her sister's hair rippled effortlessly into long, golden ringlets at the touch of their mother's brush, her hair was always an impossible rat's nest, or so her mother said. But she didn't mind because Pippi Longstocking had upside down braids too. She knew because her father sometimes read Pippi's adventures to her and even called her Pippi. She didn't mind that a bit either because Pippi was the strongest and smartest girl in the world.

She wound her arms absent-mindedly over the railing of the top floor breezeway, a long hall punctuated by a line of identical doors. At one end was the staircase that led to the park where she played. The other end stopped dead at a darkened hub, a conjunction of other breezeways that led to places unknown.

The darkened hub housed the incinerator, an ominous, smelly, blackened door where her mother threw the garbage. Once, her sister ate some purple tablets she found on the floor next to the incinerator. When she came back from the hospital, her face was covered with splotches and tiny red lines from getting her stomach pumped, her mother had said. Her mouth stayed purple for days.

She didn't know where her sister was right now, though she vaguely remembered her mother saying, "watch your sister." Charisse had a mind of her own. Maybe she was swinging on the swing, or inside the locked door.

Her stomach grumbled again, making her hope that her mother's warm creamy face would soon appear. Her mother had long, soft brown hair that fell over it when she leaned down to help tie her shoes. When her mother smiled, it made her think of the thick, cinnamon oatmeal cookies with fat juicy raisins she baked. But her mother didn't smile much anymore.

Behind the locked door was her family's one-bedroom apartment. Her father was a student of "po-lit-i-cal sci-ence" he had taught her to say. That fact dominated their lives even in his regular absences, the apartment stacked with books and vital papers that he constantly seemed to put in and take out of a leather briefcase. Sometimes, when nobody was looking, she would open the thick books and squint her eyes at the tiny letters that crowded every page. She looked for pictures that might explain the stories her father was reading, but she never found any.

When her father was home, quiet and cleanliness ruled, a dictate that had her mother on her hands and knees stripping and waxing the worn linoleum once a week and otherwise in a state of constant agitation over child-generated spills, dirt falling out of clothes, spontaneous giggling, excessive crying, and toys left on the floor. She would hear her father over and over calling "June! June! June!," sending her mother scurrying to deliver him coffee, food, and ironed shirts.

Then he was gone, to class, to teach, to some meeting. The apartment became inert, as if it breathed a sigh of relief. Her mother would breathe too, taking time to read, or sing to them, or just stand at the kitchen window facing the campus while she washed the dishes and watch the pretty co-eds with their long bouncing hair and arms full of books criss-cross the campus.

This was something her mother would never dare, venture onto campus, though it was a

shortcut to work. Even when she took them to the babysitter on her way, they always walked around. Her mother's step turned decidedly more brisk as she circled the periphery of the campus, her grip squeezing tighter, pulling her and her sister along beside her as fast as their little legs could carry them. Much later she would tell her that just thinking of walking across the campus made her heart pound and sucked the breath out of her chest.

But the past had no meaning and the future was impossible to imagine. Instead, she focused on two huge birds wheeling effortlessly in the updrafts near the top of the mountain. Eagles, her father had pointed out to her once—bald eagles.

Her eyes wandered down the mountain's furry side. Someday she would learn it was called Mount Sentinel because it stood like a guard at the head of Hellgate Pass that led to the Rockies, the Great Divide, the Great Plains and beyond. But for now, she called it the "M" mountain because of the huge letter "M" on its side. It was also the first letter of their last name and her father even said that it was their own special mountain.

Her father was teaching her other letters too which was something she had been eager to accomplish because it seemed important to him for her to be smart. It made him happy when she remembered each letter on her blackboard as he pointed to it with a long stick. But sometimes she forgot one. He would slam the stick on the chair, his face turning red and scary. Just the sight of it made all the letters fly clean out of her head.

Then his lips would stretch thinner and thinner, the dirty, crooked tooth in the middle of his lower jaw emerging. By then, she couldn't see anything except that dirty, crooked tooth. So she finally would cry and that would make him madder, so he'd yell, "shut up, turn it off," over and over again, and finally spank her with whatever was handy, a hanger, a brush, a hand. He hated crying more than anything. Maybe she wasn't learning her alphabet, but she was learning not to cry. Eventually he had given up which was just fine with her. Later, she heard him tell

her mother that she was too stupid to learn her alphabet and that she would never amount to anything.

And she would forgive him for that for if it was her mother who cowered in the face of failure, it was her father who strained like a mighty Atlas against the weight and gravity of it, pulling himself up out of the hellhole he called Montana by his own bootstraps, pulling her, her mother, her sister and her brothers to come along with him. He was the smartest and strongest man in the world and she knew someday she would prove him wrong.

She sighed, gazing down the long corridor, the same doors both ways, nobody in sight and felt something like crisp bacon stuck in her stomach. Squinting at the mountain she wondered what the “M” was made of and how somebody had put it there. What would it feel like to stand on the top of the “M?” The mountain looked furry and soft, like her golden-brown teddy bear. What was on the other side? Was it like the song her mother sang to her sometimes? “The bear went over the mountain and what do you think he saw?” She sang to herself softly.

She would see for herself. She trotted down the breezeway, thick summer calluses padding on the concrete floor, past the row of similar doors, down the flights of stairs. As she crossed the browned lawn, she gathered dandelions gone to seed and blew the tiny parachutes airborne. She stepped gingerly through the sparse patches of clover, preoccupied by orange-striped honeybees and skipped through a flurry of white cottonwood seeds that swirled and fell like snowflakes. When she finally reached a dense stand of lush trees and brush, she stopped. It was cool here and quiet. Looking back at the apartment building she realized no one could see her. She let herself be swallowed into the caress of leaves and the scent of green—dirt, pollen, decay, and oxygen.

After fighting branches and thorns, she found the base of the mountain. It was an immediate, sheer incline looming up frighteningly. She couldn’t even see the “M.” What she could see didn’t look furry and friendly either. Instead it was a violent upheaval of jagged layers of

shale, gouges of red clay, twisted pines and brush clinging to outcroppings, harsh lines of leering rimrock, and huge boulders. She stumbled over the rise and fall of ground, along the base of the mountain until she came to a less precipitous approach. It was a jutting obstacle course of gray shale, loose gravel, and slabs of granite as big as she was.

This was where rattlesnakes lived. She knew because Grandpa Tom had always warned her about them. Still, she loved the cool skin of garden snakes as they slid through her hands and coiled around her wrist when she captured them. Her Grandpa Tom had once showed her the skin and rattler of a rattlesnake he had killed. When he shook the rattler, it'd sounded like the soft rustling of paper. "Be careful when you hear that," he'd said. She'd keep her ears open, like he had warned, and be sure not to step in any of the shadows under the rocks where rattlesnakes might be cooling off.

She scanned the ground looking for special rocks. Grandpa Tom was a "rock hound." He had showed her granite, a hard, gray rock with speckles, mica with thin, shiny, peeling layers, fossils that looked like clam shells, Apache tears which were black, glossy droplets from volcanoes, and her favorite, agates, which came in all colors, shapes and sizes. Grandpa Tom's agates were polished slick and smooth as glass, showing each stone's unique heart. She gathered a handful of raw agates. They were dull beiges, whites, and reds, plain in comparison to his. She shoved them into her pockets smiling, remembering how he had called her a "pebble puppy." He always made her laugh even when he took out his teeth to scare her, or especially when he'd wiggle his ears. He would laugh too when she tried to wiggle hers.

Returning to her task, she found a foothold in some loose rock. She grabbed at protruding rocks and brush to pull herself up but her bare feet slipped. Now she was on her belly, crawling, clutching, clawing at dirt and rock, making a few feet of headway only to slip back to where she started. There was rusty clay between her toes, in her underwear, under her fingernails, in multiplying hairline scrapes and gashes in her knees and elbows.

Finally, clawing her way far enough that looking down seemed precarious, she balanced herself on a flat rock and sat down. She looked up the side of the mountain to see how much farther she had to go. It stretched above her forever.

Contemplating the sun, a softened ball of light hanging at the far end of the valley, she noticed the air was cooler, signaling that it was close to dinnertime. Her stomach growled loudly. She gazed at the view, listening to the drone of grasshoppers. The apartment complex looked small. Little people appeared in and out of doors. She squinted to focus where she thought her door might be. There was someone in the breezeway and then she saw someone go in, the door open and close.

She felt a familiar heaviness in her chest, the heaviness that came when the right sounds failed to come out of her mouth that her father wanted to hear or when her mother didn't answer the door. It was a heaviness that came these days instead of tears.

Sliding on her butt, giving up the ground she'd gained, she went back where she'd come from, through the brush, across the lawn, up the flights of stairs to her floor. As she trudged home, she promised herself, *someday I'm going to climb that mountain and see what's on the other side.*

She found her door and knocked. The door opened and she surrendered to sheen of the vinyl floor. Dusk was crowding through the kitchen window. "Where have you been?" her mother asked distantly.

"I was trying to climb the 'M' mountain," she answered.

"What do you have in your pockets?" Said her mother looking at her bulging shorts and the layers of dirt that covered her.

"Agates," she answered, fingering their cold smoothness in her pocket.

"Put those outside by the door right now, take off your clothes immediately, and get into the bathtub before your father gets home," her mother said sounding tired and holding her belly.



Great Falls

1969

*When a dream becomes flesh,
trouble is not far behind.*
Wanadi, Chief of the Invisible People

CHAPTER 13

Man Who Fell Out of the Sky

One summer night, Grandma Helen dreamed a man was falling out of the sky. When she woke up, she found her pet poodle, Baby, whimpering and pacing the floor. After calming the dog, she fell back into a restless sleep.

Toronto, June 30

Spring had barely faded in Toronto the day my father handed me forty dollars Canadian and twenty American on the platform of a Calgary bound train. “Be careful with it,” he warned. “You have to buy a bus ticket from Calgary to Whitefish. Your Grandpa and Grandma will be there to pick you up.”

I nodded putting the money in my shoe next to a folded piece of paper with important phone numbers and a list of “do’s and don’ts,” mostly don’ts my mother had given me before we left St. John’s. The gist of it went something like, “don’t talk to strangers” and “keep your money in your shoe.” The first would turn out to be the hardest to follow as most everyone from then on would be a stranger. The latter, hardest to forget, as it would be wadded up in the arch of my foot for the whole trip.

My father patted Tommy’s head and while reminding me to take care of my brother grabbed me by the elbow and shuffled us up onto the stairs behind the train car carrying our luggage. I remember feeling so grown up, stepping into the rumbling coach, my guitar slung over my shoulder, my little brother in tow. A few months earlier, I had clipped an advertisement out of one of my father’s magazines for tickets to Woodstock. I had begged him for days after that to let me go. My friends and I would hitchhike there. I was devastated and even surprised when he had said no especially when he seemed to promote and defend the counter culture

ideals in his classroom. This wasn't exactly the train to Woodstock, but it was promising, especially with no parents along.

Once inside the plush cabin of upholstered high-backed seats and large, tinted glass windows, we waved to the back of our father's balding head as he hurried away, bound for the airport and home to St. John's. As he left, Tommy said, "You know, I'm really gonna miss him." This is not something I remembered from that trip. I would reread it in a letter I had written home that summer that my mother had saved in a trunk. We would find it years after my brother's tragic death which would give his words new meaning.

Including a layover, Tommy and I traveled almost five days, passing over thousands of miles of rural Canadian landscape dotted with yellow rolling farms and free range ranches, an occasional city such as Edmonton rising up like a concrete apparition out of the vacant prairie. We eventually arrived in Calgary, a dirty, sprawling city that seemed glutted with drunken cowboys, Stampeders waiting for the big day.

Once there, we dragged our oversized suitcases to the Greyhound bus station through dark streets choked by car exhaust, only to find all the buses gone. We dallied long enough in the station to buy tickets, put our luggage in lockers and stop at the photo booth. Four, damp, two by two black and white pictures rolled out, me looking sleepy, Grace Slick coal black eyeliner smeared under my eyes, and my hair in serious need of a comb. Tommy's face seemed dwarfed behind his large black thick-lens glasses. His goofy grin showed off a beaver-sized silver capped tooth, a gaudy replacement for the piece he had lost to a hockey puck that winter.

Then we walked past noisy bars in search of a hotel, noticing kids our age on the streets, disheveled and staring as we passed by. A blue neon sign that read *H-o-t-l* was a welcome relief from the uncertainty of the night. Inside, I signed my name carefully on the register and after

paying the man four dollars, we devoured two heaping two-dollar plates of mashed potatoes, gravy, green beans and roast beef—in the lobby restaurant—as if we were starving. We probably felt like we were. We’d only had one full meal a day on the train prior to that.

Later a couple of men who claimed to be cops knocked at our hotel room door. They sneered “don’t get smart with me sister” through the door when I refused to let them in or answer their questions. When I finally did, they threatened to take us “runaways” to jail unless we could prove otherwise. I didn’t think it as odd as they did that a fourteen year-old girl and her nine-year-old brother were staying the night in a four dollar room in a rundown section of Calgary with no sign of adult kin. They let us go when I gave them the phone numbers in my shoe.

The next day we boarded the Greyhound where I scribbled lyrics about the adventure—a song with an Arlo Guthrie twang and the only chord I knew well, E. I practiced it all the way to Whitefish, imagining myself back home, in my best friend, Allison’s, smoky living room. Her father would be gone as usual, her mother living too far away to show up unannounced. She’d pour Scotch from her father’s liquor cabinet into glasses of iced Coca Cola for her, Joanne, and me. We’d chain smoke filterless Export As and in the hazy din of her living room we’d frug and pony to “Back in the USSR.” And when the *White Album* began to wane, we’d plan our trip to England as soon as we graduated where we’d meet Mick Jagger, making our living as waitresses serving Londoners tea and toast. As I watched the Western landscape spin by from the bus window, I imagined that when we had finally gotten almost too sleepy to talk, I’d take out my guitar and sing my harrowing tale of cowboys, cops, darkened streets and lost kids. Little did I know, the adventure had just begun.

Whitefish, July 5

Grandpa couldn’t wait to take out his teeth and scare me with them. Not even in his car five minutes and he was pushing them out through his lips. The trick turned his friendly grin

into a horrific one, startling Tommy for a second until he realized it was a joke and then he laughed.

“Grandpa,” I said feeling slightly embarrassed that he was treating me like I was still a kid. If he only knew that just few days earlier, I had been in a serious lip lock with an older boy who had boarded our train in Winnipeg. We managed to neck most of the way to Edmonton, taking cigarette breaks while he played country-western songs I had never heard on my guitar.

Tommy had to be kept occupied with constant supply of change for Orange Nehis and Baby Ruths. The sugar had gotten him so wound up that the conductor caught him hanging off the train between one of the coaches, from the upper half of the split door he had somehow managed to open. He had his head and arms out pretending he was flying like a bird. The irate conductor threatened to throw us both off the train.

My necking partner got off in Edmonton promising to write. My lips, chapped ragged from the kissing, were sealed about the entire incident. Tommy wouldn’t tell either. Of my three brothers and one sister, Tommy never tattled.

“Can you wiggle your ears yet?” Grandpa asked me, with his teeth back where they belonged.

“You can wiggle your ears?” Tommy said incredulously.

“Yup. Just watch.” Grandpa moved the ears that stuck out prominently from his head up and down without touching them. He looked back at me through the rearview mirror to see if I was paying attention. I giggled obligingly.

“No Grandpa, I still can’t do it.”

“How’d you do that?” Tommy leaned forward from the backseat. He was new to the scary teeth and ear wiggling game, as he was just a baby when we had left Montana. Grandpa showed him again and Tommy did his best imitation, flapping his ears up and down with his fingers like Dumbo, which led to making funny noises and faces, which led to bouncing in the

back seat and clicking the ashtray lid open and shut repeatedly. Soon, Grandpa pulled the car to the shoulder, leaned over the back seat and slapped Tommy's legs. "Shape up or ship out," he warned. I felt myself stiffen at the tone of his voice. Grandma turned to Tommy and began talking to him in a soft, reasonable tone, explaining to him why he shouldn't jump around and snap the ashtrays, that it might cause Grandpa to have an accident. The sound of her voice seemed to soothe Tommy and Grandpa too, his shoulders dropping and his jaw relaxing.

Whitefish was settled in the Rockies, the greenery and cool mountain terrain a welcome change to the monotony of the plains. But eventually we descended ears popping, into country just like Saskatchewan and Alberta, but on the American side—and just as brown, dusty, hot and empty. Along the road Grandpa waved in the direction of the old homestead he had grown up on with his ten brothers and sisters, and to the place where he once released a bunch of wild horses he had caught and broke but couldn't sell. Grandma threw in various chitchat like, "How is your mother? How is school? How is living in Newfoundland?"

"Fine. Fine. Fine." I answered politely. At that moment it was probably drizzling and too cold to wear shorts in St. John's. Summers so far had barely lasted a month which was probably why Grandpa had asked, "You sick?" when he had first seen me. My skin had barely seen the sun in the three years I had been living there.

"Before the Spanish brought horses the Plains Indians hunted by stampeding buffalo over the cliffs," Grandpa said pointing to a rocky butte in the distance.

"That's called a buffalo jump. At the bottom you'll find tipi rings and old fire pits where the buffalo were turned into food, shelter, clothing and tools, lots of arrowheads too. I'll take you there." He turned his tanned, weathered face to me. It was set with a wide grin that flashed his perfect white teeth. He didn't look anything like my balding, pink skinned, blue-eyed father who had recently grown long sideburns and a moustache.

Grandpa's eyes were the color of moss agates. His full head of hair was jett black and cropped short. He had a big hump in the middle of his crooked nose that had been broken several times in fistfights back when he drank and made his living as a wrangler. His dark features and nose made people say he was part Indian. He'd never denied it. He hadn't seemed to age a bit in the years since I had seen him last (with the help of a bottle of Grecian formula I later saw on rim of his bathtub.) I might have been too old for his games, but I was still drawn to him and his stories with the same fascination.

As he talked, I absorbed the terrain around me that seemed to be so much of him. A yearning rose up in me opening a hole in my chest that felt as big and vast as the sky above me and rolling prairie around me. This was my country too even though I had been living far away for many years. I wanted to scoop it in and make it tell me how I was connected to it.

Great Falls, July 6

Grandpa's basement was along the lines of what I had remembered most about him, deer head trophies on the walls and boxes of polished agates, fossils, fools gold, volcanic rock and a collection of arrowheads and spearheads as well as other Indian artifacts he had found while hunting or prospecting. He still had the Naugahyde couch and chair with the wagon wheel armrests and the gun rack full of rifles. The room smelled faintly of gunpowder, 3-n-1 oil and musty deer heads. While Grandma made Kool-Aid, Grandpa spread out his rock collection. "You still collect rocks?" He asked.

"Yes," I said thinking of the polished agates sitting on my dresser.

Tommy was absorbed momentarily but as soon as he downed the Kool-Aid he was buzzing, this time homing in on Grandpa's rifles. Grandpa's face clouded over and his green eyes turned to dark flint.

“They’re for huntin’ not playin’, Tommy. You’re not old enough to hunt anyway,” he said not offering to even show him someday. After that he was silent for a while as if thinking about something. Years later, Grandma would tell me that one of Grandpa’s brothers, Johnny, had been accidentally shot dead by their oldest brother Joe, while showing off with a pistol. Johnny had bled to death while his brothers and sisters watched helplessly. Their parents had gone to town, a day’s ride by horseback. There was no car or telephone. I wonder if Grandpa had realized that Johnny had died at the same age Tommy was that summer we came to visit.

If Tommy was disappointed, he didn’t show it. His feelings were as always, shielded behind the thick lenses of his glasses and protected by a mental agility that allowed him to move instantaneously to something new. Soon he was shifting from object to object in the room. Grandpa was getting edgier by the minute.

“Why don’t you come with me upstairs, Tommy?” Grandma said firmly but gently. She was wearing her usual steady smile, her blue eyes twinkling from her lightly freckled face. She was my grandmother by marriage, Grandpa’s second wife. But she had always seemed to treat us like her own. Mirthful, open, and genuine are words I would later think of when describing her and her expression. But when I was fourteen, I would find her eyes so intense, as if she could see exactly what I was thinking and feeling, I often had to look away.

She certainly had some kind of magic with Tommy too, because he stampeded willingly up the basement stairs to her invitation, “Come and play fetch with Baby,” arms and legs in all directions.

Logan, July 7

Tipi rings were large, darkened, circular indentions in the earth and scattered across the dusty landscape at the foot of the buffalo jumps. I imagined hundreds, maybe thousands of huge, shaggy bison, not jumping, but stumbling, hurtling, tumbling one over the other, over the cliffs above and crashing to their deaths on the rocks where I was standing. The bodies must

have piled high. Turning them into food, clothing, shelter and tools surely had taken hundreds of hands, weeks and weeks.

“A stampede’s unstoppable. A herd moves as one,” Grandpa said, explaining that even if the lead animals had realized their fate in time to stop, the momentum of the tons of terrified animals raging behind would propel them all to their horrible deaths.

We poked around in the dirt, rocks, cactus and tumbleweeds looking for arrowheads, wary every moment of the possibility of Diamondbacks springing and striking out too quick to get out of the way. The reptiles cooled off in the shadows of rocks during the heat of day. Before we had left the house, Grandpa had showed us the skin of one he had killed that measured over three feet. He also shook the rattlers he had collected so we could hear a rattlesnake’s warning. It reminded me of the soft rustling of paper. We didn’t find any arrowheads, or any snakes but Tommy managed to kick a clump of cacti. Grandpa patiently sat him on a rock, pulled off his tennis shoes and socks and carefully pulled the spines out of his toes.

On the way home we saw a group of longhaired hitchhikers on the road holding a sign, “Calgary or bust.”

“Jesus,” Grandpa said shaking his head. “Probably draft-dodgers running off to Canada.”

I didn’t say a word but I knew if my father had been there, there would have been a fight. Grandpa was a Republican and my father was into activities better not discussed with Grandpa like demonstrations against the war, labor union strikes and whatever else he could organize his students into caring about. He’d even been accused of being a communist.

I thought of my longhaired boyfriends back home and knew Grandpa wouldn’t approve of them either. I was beginning to understand why my father had left Montana all those years ago, vowing never to return.

Before we got back to Great Falls, Grandpa stopped to point to a menacing looking security fence gleaming in the distance. It surrounded an indentation in the ground. There were no signs making impossible to tell what it was.

“Minuteman missals,” Grandpa said taking out his binoculars to see what he could of the nuclear warheads hidden underground. I remembered vaguely hearing about the hundreds of underground missal sights dotting the plains of America. In Canada, the possibility of nuclear war had been distant and easily forgotten. I felt a chill run under my skin.

Great Divide, July 8

Bighorn sheep hang out on the crags of rock in Glacier National Park that no mortal man could possibly reach on foot. Their light-footedness is nothing short of miraculous, occupying improbable, narrow outcroppings with their dainty hooves, while balancing their large wooly bodies. We saw a few through Grandpa’s field glasses, white puffs on faraway cliffs.

As the car chugged up the “Going -to-the Sun Highway,” dark, jagged peaks leered all around. Bear grass was in full bloom along the road, long, bare stalks topped with round, cottony tufts carpeting the mountainside. At other points in the road, walls of rock split by miniature cascades of water, called “weeping walls” kept the blacktop ahead wet and slippery. Though we safely hugged the mountain going up, going down, nothing but the shoulder and a low stone barrier separated the car from what seemed like a drop off into oblivion. I felt my heart pound and my stomach lurch in anticipation of being flung into space should the tires miss the turn—a queer sort of terror mixed with awe.

Grandpa had summed the scene up with a sweep of his arm and a simple explanation, “God’s country.” I didn’t know if I really believed in God. A few years earlier, when the Pope began banning books, my mother said he had gone too far and stopped taking us to church. My father, who said he was an atheist, had defined the idea of God as a crutch to avoid the real

truth of our existence, “you’re born, you live, you die and that’s the end of the story.”

Everything else was subject to the laws of science, including nature, which he said had come about as a series of predictable accidents. Maybe there wasn’t some white bearded man sitting on a throne on top of the clouds like the frescoes in the cathedral we had attended when we lived in New York City, but to think the magnificent peaks rising before me had come into being as the result of some accident seemed impossible too.

“The Great Divide runs right down the center of Glacier and on through the rest of the continent. From there, all the rivers either flow east or west.” Grandpa showed us on the map a dotted line that looped down from Canada, through the Rockies that cut through the easterly side of the state towards the Bitterroot Mountain range, where Missoula was located and was where Tommy and I had been born. I imagined a bird’s eye view, the Continental Divide like the ridges of some prehistoric dinosaur backbone, squiggles of rivers spreading out on either side. Years later when I flew over the Rockies, I would crane my neck from the airplane window to try to define it in the sprawl of mountains in the miniature landscape below me.

At a tourist stop, we took pictures. I bought postcards of buffalo, wild horses, mountain peaks, notorious cowboys and cowgirls like Annie Oakley and Buffalo Bill and several of sad looking “Indian chiefs” the description had said, to send to friends. As I decided what to send to whom, I wondered how my friends back home were doing without me. And then there were the boys who hung out with us from time to time. Desi had long auburn hair and a kissable face full of freckles (though I hadn’t kissed him yet.) He and Bobby had even written me a song before I left. Drew was pale and moody with long, stringy brown hair but he could sing “Get Back” just like John Lennon. I sent postcards to all.

When we ate lunch, Grandpa noticed me addressing the cards to boys. He grinned, “Do you know what to do when a boy gets fresh?”

“Nope,” I said after a pause. I wasn’t sure if getting “fresh” included necking. The only other thing a boy had tried to do was feel me up, which I didn’t allow. It wasn’t because I was shy. I just didn’t want anyone to know about the Kleenex in my bra.

“Cross your legs,” Grandpa said.

“What?” I asked.

“Cross your legs,” Grandpa chuckled.

I blushed when I realized he was talking about intercourse. I knew about it from the *birth control handbook* my father had tossed on my bed one day without explanation. I was almost thirteen. On the front cover was the photograph of a sleeping, half naked woman. In the corner a single snake entwined around a staff that turned into a fist—“Medicine for the People” printed around that. On the back, a naked couple stood in a pond, holding hands. The images seemed to promise the beauty and freedom of sexual love. I read it from cover to cover. But neither the contents of the book, nor the subject of sex had ever turned into conversations, even with my friends.

Later, Grandpa surprised me with a silk scarf he had seen me look at in the souvenir shop, the same brilliant blue of the Montana sky. On it was a map of the state and in bold letters, “Montana, Big Sky Country.”

I loved the attention. Many years later, I would wonder if I had reminded him at all of his daughter who had died tragically the same year I was born. We had the same name, but I knew nothing about her then, not even what she looked like. The last year of her life she had been fourteen going on fifteen, just like me.

Tenderfoot, July 10

A surprisingly tall woman, Bess greeted us with gray hair pushed up into a beat up straw cowboy hat, big pilot’s flight glasses, worn jeans, dirty cowboy boots and a tucked flannel shirt.

I immediately thought of my mother whom I had hardly ever seen in anything but a dress, nylons, make-up and neatly coiffed hair.

The first thing my great-aunt seemed to do was size the two of us up as if we were some animal stock she was about to purchase. Tommy, tall and brawny for his age, seemed to pass inspection. But for me, I'm sure it looked like any brisk wind could have blown me clean away. Her husband Gerald, a stocky man with a belly that hung over a large silver buckle was dressed similarly to Bess but with a face full of unshaved stubble. He studied me for a minute and finally said matter-of-factly, "She's sure not a Mongar. Mongar women are big-busted." If I could have slunk off anywhere, I would have.

"Got coffee, Bess?" Grandpa said.

Bess ushered us to her house over cactus, cow pies and afterbirth, Tommy managing to step in numerous gooey piles. Her house was a tiny weathered shack with a tarpaper roof. Inside, an aluminum percolator bubbled on the wood stove, the sharp aroma of coffee mixed with bacon grease, wood smoke, old leather and horses filled the house. She served us up cups of the blackest coffee I'd ever seen. Grandpa said a spoon could stand straight up all by itself in a cup of her brew. Bess laughed, the hard set in her jaw softening. It was easy to tell she was fond of her little brother.

Bess and Gerald owned what seemed to be boundless, rolling acres of dusty Tenderfoot country. Tenderfoot got its name from the roughness of the terrain that left horses "tender footed." Hers was a free-range ranch, meaning that the thousand or so head of cattle that grazed off the prairie grass, roamed the vast acreage until round-up where the scattered herd would be gathered from the hills, coulees, canyons, backwashes, and rim rock into corrals by cowboys on horseback and then moved by truck and train to market and sold to the slaughterhouses.

Well into their sixties, Bess told Grandpa she and Gerald were too old to run the ranch. It was getting harder and harder to get reliable help and the fluctuating price of homegrown

beef competing with imports was chewing away at profits. Plus none of Bess' children were interested in ranching. A nephew she had been grooming to take over the ranch had been found dead on the open range lying next to his saddled, grazing horse as if he had just stopped to take a nap.

After coffee, Bess put me in a pair of chaps and a cowboy hat and then boosted me onto a beautiful bay. Grandpa snapped the picture. So this was my heritage, I thought, feeling connected to the powerful animal heaving beneath me. For a moment I entertained the idea of becoming Bess' protégé and inheriting all that land. How much would it take to turn me into a cattle queen? I would build a nicer house and dress in black and silver. I would marry one of those loyal, slim hipped, square-jawed cowboys I'd read about in Zane Grey books or had seen on Twenty Mule Team Borax theater (but with long hair—I wouldn't tell Grandpa.) Before I could finish my fantasy, the horse took off in a trot, my teeth rattling at the other end of my tailbone, bouncing and pounding into the saddle. I just couldn't get the hang of holding on with my knees and letting my weight balance on the stirrups instead of my butt. I knew at that moment I'd never make it as a cowgirl.

Little Belts, July 11

Grandpa had to go back to his job as a lineman for Montana Power after a week with us. Grandma decided it was a good time to take Tommy to visit her daughter in Missoula. She had kids he could play with and she knew Grandpa's patience was wearing thin. So far Tommy had only been sent to his room with warnings. I had gone in several times to see if he was OK and he said he was, but I was worried that it might get worse. Grandpa seemed more patient than my father, but it seemed to depend largely on Grandma's steady nature. I felt sure he was capable of snapping and Tommy was enough to make the Pope snap, my mother had once said.

I didn't think about telling my grandparents that the school psychologist had said Tommy couldn't sit still because there something was wrong with him. His brain worked differently than everyone else's. He had recommended medicine and therapy. It was all too experimental, so my mother had refused to consider drugging him. My father didn't want to be bothered with the therapy, he'd said. Kids should do what they're told. And if they don't they get punished. I guess he'd learned that from his father.

The night before Grandma left, she came looking for socks for Grandpa whose dresser was in the guest room. When she opened the drawer, it was a mess. "Men," she said laughing as she pulled the drawer out and dumped the socks on the bed where she rematched and organized them. "You gotta love 'em though," she said as she worked.

I could tell my grandparents really loved each other. She told me they had met at an Eagles dance and that they still went dancing every Saturday. Each night before they went to bed, I had also seen Grandpa rub her misshapen feet, deformed from wearing shoes that were too small when she was a child. I had never seen my father rub my mother's feet even though she sank into a near comatose exhaustion at the end of every day. He never took her dancing either. I had never heard my mother chuckle over matching his socks or ironing his shirts. Neither one of them laughed much at all.

Grandma and Tommy gone, Grandpa and I sat at the Formica kitchen table while he drank his morning coffee. I sipped a cup he had poured me that looked every bit as dark as Bess'. It was just as bitter too but the warm liquid was soothing in the chilly morning air. On the table was an unopened pack of Lucky Strikes. They had been lying there all week.

"Do you know what these are?" He asked turning them in his hand. His fingernails were wide and flat with deep ridges.

"Sure. Cigarettes?" I said wondering where this was going.

"Yup. Cigarettes. But they're more than that—a reminder."

“Of what?” I asked taking another sip of bitter coffee.

“How lucky I am. He stood up, unbuttoned his shirt and pulled up his undershirt. A long, curved thin scar ran from his back to his breastbone along the bottom edge of his ribs on one side of his chest.

“What happened?” I asked horrified.

“They cut out half my lung. Cancer. Back then I smoked six packs a day. I keep these as a reminder of how lucky I am.” He rebuttoned his shirt and sat back down to his coffee. “That’s life,” he added. “Two teaspoons of sour for every one teaspoon of sweet.” He was quiet for several moments gazing into his cup as if he was seeing something.

“I am going in an airplane today. Gonna check some power lines for the company up in the Little Belts. I was born up in that country you know?” He said pushing the cigarette pack towards the wall and draining his cup. “I hate flyin’,” he added, a grin returning to his face. “A man’s two feet belongs on the ground.” His laugh rumbled deep in his chest.

“Ready to go rock huntin’ when I get home?” He said.

I nodded.

“It’ll take some time to make you a rock hound like me,” he smiled. “You’re still just a pebble puppy.” He tousled my hair, told me not to open the door to strangers and left with his thermos full of coffee and his tool belt over his shoulder.

I waited—patiently at first and then pacing the plastic runners crisscrossing the carpet while the game shows and the soap operas blared on TV. I inspected the framed pictures of Grandma Helen’s children and grandchildren sitting on the TV console. They all had the same fair faces and intense blue-eyes. My grandfather and grandmother hadn’t had any children of their own, though my grandfather had raised her son and daughter from her previous marriage. I didn’t see pictures of my father or of his dead sister, or any of us for that matter. The lack of our presence on top of the TV console made me suddenly see how fragile my connection to my

grandfather was. I wondered if sending my brother and me to him for the summer had been my father's way to reach out to him after all these years.

Later, I hung in the kitchen eating canned tomato soup and fingering the pack of Lucky Strikes. I felt guilty that I had schemed all week how to break it open and steal a smoke or two. I thought about Grandpa's story. Maybe he had told it as a wise parable to an impressionable granddaughter but I wasn't even connecting my own rebellious puffing with the real, desperate desire and despair he had described. What had sunk in was his dogged discipline and his sheer will to survive. He had quit drinking the same way, an unopened whiskey bottle kept within an arm's length every day until the infatuation had left him. He'd been lucky and survived other times—shot and almost bled to death in a hunting accident and then electrocuted by a downed power line that had blown him clean off of a utility pole. For a moment I felt lucky too, that he had lived and was around to sit and share a cup of coffee with me. I wondered what it would be like to have family around more like Grandma and Grandpa and Bess.

As the afternoon waned, I watched the thunderheads bristling across the dead, brown prairie, but not a drop of rain. Great Falls was beginning to seem like such a desolate place. I couldn't even imagine what it was like when there was nothing, when my grandfather's father had walked from Nebraska following a cattle drive after the Civil War had ended. He had found the Tenderfoot and staked a claim. I wondered how anyone could stand seeing such stark emptiness day after day after day and not go crazy. I felt even less a part of this place than I did in the maritime greenery of the rocky island where I had lived for the last three years. I was ready to go home.

Getting back home meant being with Allison and Joanne and resuming our week-end slumber parties which usually included acting out *Romeo & Juliet*. It had started when Olivia Hussy put Shakespearean sonnets on the teenage map by playing Juliet in a film version of the classic. It had been rated "R" so the three of us had made ourselves up to look as sixteen as

possible. We saw it three times. Later, in my father's library, I discovered a shelf filled with identical thin blue volumes, all of Shakespeare's plays. I sneaked *Romeo and Juliet*.

Allison, the tomboy, always played Romeo and Joanne and I competed for the best Juliet. Joanne usually won the role. I guessed it was because she was more feminine than me with her ironed honey-colored hair and perfectly applied liquid eyeliner, her make-up complete with the frostiest Slickeringo lipstick she could find. And she had real breasts. Plus Allison and her had been best friends long before I came along. It had taken almost the whole school year before they finally invited me for a slumber party. Then I had to prove myself by learning to smoke and inhale and by necking all night with a boy they had picked to be my steady. Before I left, Allison had even told me that she liked me better than Joanne. I wondered if she still did.

When I finally wore out all my longings for home, I sat down to write a song that I had been thinking about since my grandfather had pointed from the highway to a thin rise of rocks at the edge of a cliff. It looked like a figure of a woman. He had told me her name, but I couldn't remember it. The story went something like: Once upon a time, a young Indian girl and boy fell in love and when he went off to war she stood on cliff watching him ride his horse until they both vanished into the horizon. She waited there day-after-day-after day until she turned to stone, and to this day waits there still.

As I struggled with the guitar chords, I remembered what Grandpa had said about my singing the night before, "Oh. That's you? I thought one of Bess' calves'd lost its way home." I had laughed. For some reason his teasing felt gentle and loving. Not like when my father teased me.

Late afternoon brought a knock at the door—several serious looking men in suits. It looked like one wore the collar of a priest. Through the door they told me they were friends of Grandpa's, they worked with him. Grandpa had told me not to open the door to strangers. So I

refused, but they wouldn't go away. When I finally did, the priest took my hand and told me to sit down. He told me my grandfather had fallen out of the sky into the mountains he was born in. He squeezed my hand and waited for me to cry. I didn't. I couldn't speak but just stared past them, through the picture window in the living room. In the distance, the dead brown prairie and the thunderheads bristling across it. Thunderheads carry lightning, thunder and rain my grandfather had told me. But they would not stop here no matter how much we needed it. They would stop somewhere in the foothills and drop precious moisture, nurturing the life growing there.

"Is there anything I can get you?" The priest asked. "We've called your grandmother and she's calling your father."

"No," I said softly turning away from the outstretched hands. There were too many strangers and I was too far from home.

Missoula, July 17

That summer, Grandpa ended up in a dark suit, hands folded over a Mason's apron, and lying in a wooden box. The church was packed with his friends and relatives. From the pew, I stared at his face, a face it seemed someone had cleverly molded out of the rusty clay where he and I had once found fossils. I decided therefore that it wasn't him and that he was alive somewhere, maybe up at Glacier watching Bighorn sheep through his binoculars or poking around the buffalo jump looking for arrowheads.

I watched all my cousins, aunts and uncles whom I barely knew from a kind of daze as they approached the casket. They bowed their heads, murmuring or crying. My father stood there and cried loudly. My mother kissed Grandpa's cheek gently and cried into a hankie with a Jackie Kennedy kind of grace. I refused to leave my seat. I didn't let one tear come out, even when strangers said, "Oh, you poor little thing. You were the last one to see him alive."

Later, I listened to Grandma tell and retell her dream. She knew, she said and their dog, Baby, knew too. But I knew something they didn't. Grandpa wasn't really dead, so what was there to cry about?

We stayed in Missoula for several weeks visiting. Just before my fifteenth birthday, the day that a man walked on the moon I discovered my first Head shop. With my birthday money, I bought a hash pipe and JOB rolling papers even though I had never smoked, much less seen grass or hash. I also bought patchouli oil and a large peace sign patch. When I returned to St. John's, I would sew it to my school uniform instead of the Prince of Wales Collegiate school crest, which would get me kicked out of high school that Fall.

While sightseeing somewhere near the "First Jail in Montana," I bought a felt cowboy hat and Indian beadwork necklaces and earrings that I'd wear during my visit. This horrified my Montana relatives. My father loved the controversy, snapping a picture of me in my Hippie-gone-West get-up, hugging a wooden Indian outside the souvenir shop.

The day we boarded the plane back to St. John's, we'd heard about a cult killing of an actress and some other people in California. By the time we landed in St. John's, a half a million young people had gathered at Woodstock. Once home, I started wearing bandannas on my jeans and saying "peace" and "far out." I learned some more guitar chords and began the tenth grade.

It seemed our life would return to normal, my fun summer with Grandpa a pleasant dream, minus the plane crash that I convinced myself never happened. And for a while it was true. But trouble had followed us home. My father and his students had worked themselves into a fervor, taking on the local government over rumors of graft and impropriety. Not surprisingly, his work visa was cancelled. Around the same time, my grandmother gave him a large sum of money from the insurance. It was also an election year in Montana's 1st Congressional District,

a Republican seat up for grabs. Everything seemed to be pointing him in the direction of his lifelong dream, and he meant to make sure it came true.

I don't remember saying good-bye to Allison and Joanne or to my other friends. But some hurts never leave you, no matter how much time goes by. I do remember my mother tried to drug our striped tabby, George, in order to take him with us, but he scratched my father so savagely that we had to find him a last minute home. George was the lucky one as far as I was concerned.

I do remember riding behind the big truck with the wooden box my father had built on the bed of it. I was with my mother in the Rambler station wagon with my littlest brothers, David and Eric and packed with plants and suitcases. It took us a while to get going, the Rambler stalling out in the middle of traffic while my mother tried to get the hang of a stick. She'd never driven a stick in her life. I had heard my mother fighting with my father before she left, refusing to drive the Rambler. But it was useless to argue. With him, you did what you had to do, no excuses.

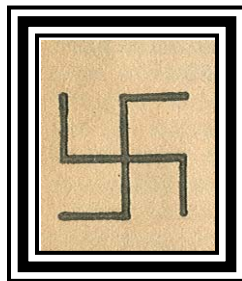
In the wake of an arctic storm, our caravan followed behind snowplows over a Newfoundland highway so thick with black ice that my mother slid off it several times into the snow banks. My father stopped each time to pull her out and try to calm her hysteria.

We boarded a double-decker ferry at Port aux Basques, crossing the St. Lawrence Seaway in high seas, icebergs crashing into the hull, frothy seas surging over the gunwales. My sister, Charisse, and I went to sleep on benches on the observation deck because the cabin below was only big enough for my mother, my father and my three little brothers. Instead of sleeping, she and I ended up clinging to them for dear life. Through the panoramic windows of the observation deck, we watched the bow ride the vertical swells like a Coney Island roller coaster.

Then we drove through New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Quebec, Ontario, crossing the border into Michigan. We traveled over thousands of miles of sub-zero northern country, all wrapped in the gloomy shroud of winter. It was bitter cold, as cold as my heart was growing the farther away we got from St. John's. We arrived in God's country, the middle of March, nineteen hundred and seventy; just in time to launch the "Mongar for Congress" campaign.

And this harrowing adventure would not seem so harrowing to me, but perfectly normal in the scheme of my life thus far—another leg in the journey through my father's grand vision of his destiny. It was a sacred destiny—we all knew it. It had already taken us from Montana, to Alaska, to Oregon, to Washington State to New York to Ontario to Newfoundland and back again to the place he swore he'd never set foot in again, Montana.

In a book, I found a Hopi symbol that had been discovered in some Southwestern caves. It resembled the swastika Hitler had borrowed to symbolize his conquest of the four corners of the earth. For the Hopi it represented their migration myth that had taken them to the four corners of their world. At the middle of the symbol was the sacred center of their universe, home, the source, the place they always returned for spiritual renewal. Though our wanderings more resembled an erratic infinity sign, returning to the center seemed to carry great meaning for my father. And maybe in some way he believed that the center, which had once been the source of a vision prompted by childhood shame and poverty, was also where its power lay. Thus when we left St. John's he'd convinced us, we weren't leaving home, we were coming home after all.





Missoula

1970

CHAPTER 14

Everyday in the week I'm in a different city. If I stay too long people try to pull me down
They talk about me like a dog
Talkin' about the clothes I wear
But they don't realise they're the ones who's square
Stone Free, Jimi Hendrix

Sloe gin fizzies were so sweet they went down quick but quicker yet for me because I liked to guzzle. It wasn't the taste, it was the buzz. And the quicker the better. The only problem was, that as long as I was on the dance floor, I could spin and dance as if I were an exquisite butterfly, free of gravity. But now that the concert was over, gravity had pulled my body onto the hallway floor, my head still spinning. I slowed it down by concentrating on the undulating shrills of the flute that still skipped and bounced along the shredded nerves of my ears. In no time, I was adrift in sloe gin when a familiar dreamscape floated by.

It was Allison, freckles, wild hair, heavy, black framed glasses, a cigarette hanging out of her mouth. Joanne pouted with frosty lips, her honey hair glistening. We were riding the city bus, on our way to Allison's house, passing over the cobblestone streets of St. John's, lined with its brooding Victorian architecture. From Water Street, I saw the towering bows of tankers and freighters at dock. I could almost smell damp, salty harbor.

In my recurring dream, my friends always disappear and I end up alone, pleading with the driver, "turn here, turn there." But it's always the wrong turn taking me from one strange street to the other.

I held the happy image in my Sloe gin daze for as long as I possibly could. Somehow, I believed that if I could make the bus pass through the right turns and make it arrive, I would finally be at peace. But a more radical idea had taken root of late from reading Carlos Castaneda. If I could make the bus arrive in my mind, I would be instantly transported there.

The images suddenly dissolved to the sound of my name. I opened my eyes to Twila's face, her bleached blonde hair hanging in damp strands in front of me. She had on so much mascara her overly large eyes looked like huge blue spiders with their velvety legs smeared into her face. Her apple-cheeks were flushed bright red from dancing, pimples rising from her melting Clearasil. She weaved above me.

"Got a schmoke?" She slurred.

"Nope," I said trying not to hate her because she wasn't Allison and that I wasn't in St. John's. It wasn't her fault I was in Missoula and had been for almost a year. She was practically the only girl who spoke to me at school anyway. We had things in common. Sloe gin, anything Boone's Farm made, and whatever else we could get wasted on.

Grinning she shrugged, tipped the last of the bottle and disappeared with the rest of the concert crowd down the hallway.

After the floor finally leveled out, I stood up and checked my pockets for papers and tobacco and finding none, walked over to the third floor railing overlooking the atrium of the student union building. As I leaned over it, I suddenly wondered what it would be like to jump.

"Thinking of jumping?" A voice said, startling me. I turned to see who just seemed to have read my mind.

"I've thought about it," he said, not smiling like he was kidding. He was leaning over the railing too, strings of long black hair hiding most of his face.

"You smoke?" He turned offering a cigarette. My stomach did a flip-flop when I saw his face, which was startlingly handsome.

"Sure," I said. He had nice hands with long fingers and wide, flat nails. He took a wooden match out of his jacket pocket and scratched it alive with his thumbnail. I sucked the filter deeply and then stepped back to get a better look hoping that my split ends hadn't taken on a

life of their own and were hanging the way I had ironed them that night. But I knew it was more likely clustered in damp, flattened waves from dancing all night. I tried not to think about it.

He propped his foot on the wall and leaned back to take a drag of his cigarette, his other hand shoved into his pocket. His unbound hair draped thickly over his shoulders. It wasn't really black; but more blue-black, like ravens' feathers. I tried to focus on his eyes to see why they were so unusual, seemingly suspended in a clear, mercurial liquid. But he would only hold my gaze for brief moments, looking away to somewhere over my shoulder. By the black of his hair, the tone of his skin, and his angular cheekbones I guessed he was an Indian.

"Your shirt's far out," I said pointing to the pink tie-dyed t-shirt he wore under his Levis jacket.

"Used to be red," he said smiling. "I tie-dyed it myself."

"Really?"

He nodded.

"What about the necklace?" His hand went to his throat where a thin strip of leather held a large, yellow bead.

"It's an African trade bead. I put it on here."

"What kind of beadwork is that?" He asked pointing his cigarette at the beaded designs on a fringed buckskin jacket I was wearing.

"Sioux, I think," I said. "The jacket belonged to my Grandpa. He's dead, died last year."

"So's Jimi," he said with distant eyes. "Hendrix." he added when I responded with a blank look. "He was half Cherokee. Just listen to the rhythms and guitar leads and you'll hear it."

“Hmm,” I said pretending I knew what he was talking about and recalling Hendrix in a headband and fringed and beaded white buckskin outfit, playing an electrified version of the Star-Spangled Banner on the Woodstock movie.

Kenny played drums and had a band when he’d lived in Billings. His mother lived at the Crow Agency, which he said was on the Crow Reservation. But now he lived in Missoula with his older sister, Rainey, and a man named Jim, who were both studying at the university. Jim was his guardian.

“Jim’s only half Indian, but he hates his white half, so he’s OK,” Kenny said.

“What about you?” I asked.

“I’m Crow/Cheyenne—a full-blood,” he said proudly.

It turned out we both went to Hellgate High. Ironically, so had my mother and father. Their unhappy experiences there told me it hadn’t changed much. “Yeah, a bunch of ignorant jocks,” I said remembering my first day, me in a mini-skirt, boots and a straw Bonnie & Clyde gangster-style hat with a carnation stuck in the brim, and them snickering and pointing like I had just stepped off the Starship Enterprise. My English teacher, an ancient woman who was probably teaching when my father attended, was especially upset by my mini skirts. She had found any opportunity to embarrass me in class. English had been my favorite subject, one I had always excelled in. Now I found any reason to skip it. Overall, I got the point pretty quick. Missoula was a Levis and flannel shirt kind of town.

“They’re all plastic,” Kenny said looking off into the distance, “ ’cause they’re white. White people fuck everything up. They fucked up my people. They fucked up my land. They’re fucking up the whole world.”

I tried to imagine myself as one of the white people Kenny hated. But he didn’t seem to notice I was white, so I pretended he was talking about some other white people and nodded in agreement.

“I read about what happened at Alcatraz. “ I offered. The article ran in *Ramparts* with a photograph of “Better Red Than Dead,” scrawled in red paint across the huge rocks outside the prison. *Ramparts* was a magazine my father brought home that I read and clipped pictures and poems from to make montages on the walls of my closet. But, I had never been this close to any of the things I had read about.

He’d never heard of *Ramparts*, he said and then looked past me for a while, taking deep drags from his cigarette.

“Where’s your dad?” I asked.

“Dead.” He said flatly and then, “Do you want to get high?”

“Yeah,” I said, the sloe gin buzz fading and knowing I wanted to get closer.

Outside the building, we stood in the snow while he loaded the bowl of a deer horn pipe with hash. All around us, snow crystals sparkling in the frozen stillness of the wee hours of the morning, clouds of our breath hanging in the air between us. Frost quickly formed in my damp hair, turning it stiff and white. I could feel the cold biting into my lungs, but I would have stood there until my boots were sealed in ice, as long as he was there too. He pulled another match from his pocket and scratched it to life, the fire illuminating the hard, handsome angles of his face as he puffed deeply. I coughed violently. I had never smoked hash before.

“You walking home?” He asked, offering to accompany me. I accepted, not knowing where Twila had disappeared.

“They don’t go for that in this town, you know, me a redskin and you white,” he said.

“I don’t care if you don’t,” I said, not really sure of what he was talking about.

As we stumbled over the icy streets, he put his arm around me to keep me warm. Together we floated down the cobblestone lanes of old Missoula. Near the yellow brick Milwaukee Road tower, we stopped. He looked skyward.

“Listen,” he said. I heard the rumble of switcher engines and the intermittent crash of boxcars coupling in the train yards behind the depot. Then, the far off honking of geese as several V-shaped shadows slipped across the crisp, starry night.

“Northern geese,” he said, “going south for the winter. It’s a sign.”

Of what, I didn’t ask. I was too lost in the warmth of the arm around me. “Yeah, Northern geese.”

CHAPTER 15

An Eskimo showed me a movie
He'd recently taken of you
The poor man could hardly stop shivering
His lips and his fingers were blue
I suppose that he froze when the wind took your clothes
And he just never got warm
But you stand there so nice in your blizzard of ice
Oh please let me come into your storm.
Thin Green Candle, Leonard Cohen

Kenny seemed like a pleasant dream when I woke the next morning to my parents screaming at each other downstairs. The aftermath of sloe gin pounded in my head. I had to pee and my tongue refused to slide over the glue that had formed on the roof of my mouth. But I knew better than to show my face downstairs.

Shivering, I laid my bare body on the cold floor and peaked through the grate in the floorboards under my bed. Slightly warmer air rose through the vent. I couldn't see my parents but I could see the hallway below and the corner of their bed through the open bedroom door.

"It's all your fault," my mother screamed. "If you'd just leave the kid alone for five minutes, he wouldn't be like this."

"Get off my back. You're always blaming me for everything. He's a mess. No son of mine would act like he does. He's probably not even mine," he screamed back.

I heard my mother wail. "How could you say that? You're the mess. You're crazy. Paranoid. You need help, look at you. You sleep all the time or you're glued to that damn TV set or you're picking on that boy. You should have gone with him to the school psychologist when he asked you to. What are we going to do now?"

“I am not crazy and I don’t need a shrink telling me that Tommy’s problems are my all fault.” I heard something hit the wall, probably his fist—another hole in the plaster. My mother started to cry.

“There is something wrong with you. This damn hair brained idea to run for congress, just like all your other crazy, stupid ideas—dragging us over hell and high-water, halfway across the damned planet. This was supposed to be it. We were supposed to settle down. Now every damn dime is gone.” I heard muffled sobbing as if she were crying into something.

I laid my pillows over the grate, pulled my bedspread around me and went to my typewriter. An anemic winter sun barely warmed the window in front of it.

“What’s going on?” My sister mumbled from her bed. She raised her head from her pillow briefly, her eyes puffy and hung over too, her long tangled hair like a golden storm.

“That thing with Tommy, you know, when he broke into that store?”

“Oh,” she said, pulling the covers over her head. Soon she was snoring.

I rolled a page of “mongar campaign” stationary into the typewriter. “end the decade of neglect and begin the decade of concern” was printed across the bottom. It was all in lower case letters including his name. His campaign manager had thought it would be catchy.

In the upper left-hand corner, a confident man in a pinstriped suit with wide lapels, dark shirt and wide paisley tie looked off the paper to some faraway place, probably a focal point supplied by the photographer who shot it. Most people might imagine he was seeing his bright future, first Capitol Hill, then the Whitehouse. But I think he was more likely seeing the boy he had once been who had slept in the loft above his mother’s horses. Or maybe he was seeing his grease covered teen-aged hands as he changed out engines on cars stolen by his stepfather and later sold in Las Vegas. He’d almost gone to jail for that one, but the judge realized the situation and had sent him to live with his father. My father had marked that day as the last time he would ever dirty his hands.

In his campaign picture, he looked as old as any grown-up I knew, but he hadn't yet turned thirty-five. One more year and he could run for president just like Jack Kennedy, he had said many times. With his long sideburns and moustache, even though his hair was disappearing on top, he still looked handsome and capable, and why not, just like a congressman, but maybe from California, not Montana.

"Trilogy of the Man Found Hanging in my Room," I typed in the blank space and sat for a minute. I really didn't know what I would write next but something else would come to me. It always did. The inspiration of the moment was simple. I had just finished reading the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy and liked the idea of threes.

As I contemplated the picture of him that seemed to preside over my writing, I wondered how his campaign manager had missed that tiny detail of his political image. Not only did he more resemble a candidate for a CIA or FBI hit list filled with names of radical university professors than a Republican congressional candidate, his gun control platform was just plain political suicide in an NRA state like Montana. That fact had darkened the last days of the campaign with anonymous phone calls and death threats. Too late, he had realized that Montanans had bought in to the rugged, armed, individualist that larger than life actors like John Wayne, Ronald Reagan, and Audie Murphy had romanticized on the big screen. The NRA had such a stranglehold on the Montana Republican party that the threat of the withdrawal of campaign contributions had forced the party to pressure him to drop out of the race. But my father had refused to bend even when, as a last ditch effort, the NRA had offered to buy his seat—if he changed his platform of course. In the end, principles didn't matter a bit to the voters. They made the final call.

I had overheard these discussions of what went wrong, what could have been done differently, what they could have seen coming. He mulled it over and over with company, with relatives, with my mother.

“Part One,” I typed beneath the title.

I was at least grateful that the days had passed of standing on the street corners in the plain, scratchy polyester my father had insisted my sister and I wear to campaign in. I didn’t miss the long evenings and week-ends we shoved pamphlets at irritated passersby as we smiled and called “Mongar for Congress” after them until our cheeks hurt. The downside of losing the election was that visitors had stopped coming by. And as nice and as our new-found family had been towards us after Grandpa died and especially during the election, we were all but forgotten now. My father had said, “Nobody likes a loser.” And maybe it was true because my relatives had now taken on a new role, informing my parents about things like seeing my sister and I hitchhiking to school or asking passersby for spare change on the downtown street corners.

“I found him hanging in my room,
nonchalantly contorting words
and chirping at the bird.”

I tapped the letters slowly, with two fingers, making several mistakes. I had flunked typing. At least I knew I ‘d never be a secretary.

Soon I was lost in the rhythmic tap, tapping of keys, a sound that had put me to sleep many a night when my father was typing his dissertation years earlier. In those days, each morning I would run to his study and see how many more pages had been added to the box labeled, “Erasable Bond.” When it was full, he had said, our lives would be different, better. Different and better to me meant that I would have my own bed and my own room and could stay in the same school until I graduated. Different and better to my mother meant a house in which to raise her five children, extended family nearby, a neighborhood, a normal life. Different and better to my father meant something I couldn’t really grasp.

He had given me his Adler typewriter when his dissertation was finally finished. Even though he never said it, the gift seemed to mean, “write.” I had even come to believe it had

magical powers that inspired its owner. After all, by his own accounts, it had turned him from a poor and neglected son of a rodeo queen and a horse wrangler, into a professor of political science and maybe still yet—a politician. Where could it take me?

I don't know how long after I had begun to write that I suddenly noticed it was quiet downstairs. Then I heard my mother's voice.

"Sonja, do you know this boy?"

I scuttled to my brother's bedroom window and peaked through the curtains. It was Kenny, standing across the street. My stomach lurched. He had on the same jeans and jean jacket but a blue tie-dyed t-shirt, his long black hair shining in the sunlight. He was just standing there, smoking a cigarette, not making any move to come to my door.

"Yes, Mom. I do," I said. "I'll be down in a minute."

"Well, I'll just invite him in," she said.

"No please don't." But it was too late. I knew by the time I got dressed and down the stairs, Kenny would be eating a piece of fresh pound cake doused in powdered sugar and drinking a large glass of milk and my mother would be revealing intimate things about me like, "she's a very lonely girl, she doesn't have any close friends." Or worse yet telling him dirty jokes with crude language that always made me blush.

"Charisse, where's the flowered blouse?" I asked in a panic as I pushed my legs into a fairly clean pair of Levi's and pulled on my boots. She pointed to a pile of clothes on the floor next to her bed. I smelled it, then slipped it on. It was wrinkled, but I never ironed anything but my hair, so I didn't care. I didn't bother with make-up or a bra either. I had quit wearing both when I moved to Missoula. Brushing my hair quickly, I ran downstairs just as my mother was asking him through the screen door if he wanted any cake. He had apparently preferred to wait on the porch.

When I went out to meet him, he asked me if I wanted to go for a walk. I quickly grabbed my mother's wool coat and left before she could think of a reason to detain us. Kenny seemed relieved when the house was finally out of sight.

"Where do you want to go?" I asked.

"Greenough."

The park was a long, chilly walk from the house, but we stopped at the corner store and he bought cokes, candy bars and more Marlboros. He lit mine the same way he had the night before, with one strike of his thumbnail across the tip of a wooden match. He carried a bunch in his jacket pocket.

I noticed Mount Sentinel was mostly still covered with snow but parts of the "M" showed through. "I used to think that the 'M' stood for my last name. My father even told me that once. I believed him." I laughed pointing to the mountain. "I even tried to climb it to see what the 'M' was made of when I was five. Didn't make it though. You been up there?"

"No," he said, "but see up there, on top of those other mountains?"

I looked to where he was pointing with his cigarette. They were completely stripped of trees. "The valley is dying." He swept his arm across the horizon and was quiet for several moments.

"Fucking Anaconda!" He spit the words out. He meant the Anaconda Pulp and Paper Mill. I had heard my father say it had churned out tons of pollutants at the far end of the valley for years, the toxins sifting into the mountain ecosystem. Missoula's air quality was one of the worst in the nation. There were high rates of cancer and birth defects amongst children in the valley.

"They're fucked up." I agreed.

“Fuckin’ A, it’s not right. These assholes bein’ belligerent to the trees, to the land, to everything.” He stood gesturing with one hand, the other on the trunk of a pine crusted with sap. It seemed he had his hand on his own skin rather than on the bark of the tree.

I tried to catch up with his outrage, but I was so struck with the absurd image of someone being belligerent to a tree, I laughed out loud.

Kenny’s seriousness turned to puzzlement and then to a smile when he realized he had made me laugh.

“Somebody is going to blow up the mill,” he said turning serious again.

“Who?” I asked.

“Somebody will. Don’t worry,” he said, though I think it must have been talk that came from Jim and Kenny’s sister who he had said were both environmental activists.

We stopped a couple of times in discreet places to take some hash. It was potent so that by the time we got to the footbridge that ran over the creek in Greenough, I felt anxious and disoriented. But as soon as I focused on the creek rushing over the boulders, it went away. The spot was one of my favorite places to sit when I tripped on acid, the churning waters transforming into thrashing Royal Lippizan stallions. When I told Kenny about it he asked, “Ever done any Orange Sunshine?”

“No,” I said. “I don’t drop that much because I don’t like to end up at home tripping. And being at my house is enough to make anybody have a bad trip.” I knew I was fishing for an invitation. I just hoped he didn’t notice my eagerness.

“I’ll ask Jim but you can probably come over.” He took out a small piece of tinfoil and opened it. Inside a tiny orange tab of acid. “How about next Saturday?”

“Sure,” I said. He got down from the railing where we were sitting and stood in front of me gazing into my eyes for a long time. His eyes again. So strange and mystical. Looking into

them, I saw my face as if I was seeing it in a perfectly still pool of water. Knowing I was being seen at the same moment I was seeing myself made me feel oddly self-conscious.

“I like your eyes,” he said. “They’re like the sky. They’re gray and blue and green. They change.”

I opened my legs to him as he leaned into me and kissed me gently. His lips were soft and warm, no shaving stubble, no whiskers at all for that matter. I finally touched his hair, running my fingers through the silky bluish strands.

“I like your hair. It’s beautiful,” I said. He shivered against me. I opened my coat and took him in. My mother had worn it when she was pregnant with me so it was almost big enough for the both of us.

We kissed for a long time; even as people passed us on the bridge, we paid no attention. In the back of my mind I was sure someone would see us who knew my cousins or my aunts. Either way, it would get back to my father and it was a wild guess these days as to how he might take it.

CHAPTER 16

Following the shadows of the skies,
Or are they only figments of my eyes?
And I'm feeling close to when the race is run.
Waiting in our boats to set sail.
Sea of joy.
Sea of Joy, Steve Winwood & Eric Clapton

“Just take a quarter,” he advised as he held out a tiny orange piece of acid. He took a half, closed his eyes and leaned back on the couch as it dissolved in his mouth.

Rainey, his sister had just left. Kenny had introduced us. She was pretty, a small woman a few years older than Kenny, with a broad face, thick lips and wavy black hair that had a reddish tint. She had just nodded towards me without making eye contact and then continued talking to him like I wasn't there. I guessed she didn't like me.

“Got any sugar?” I asked Kenny after she left.

“Sugar? Why?”

“Just a habit I got into when I lived in Newfoundland. My friends, we always took a spoon full of sugar—you know like Mary Poppins, ‘A spoon full of sugar helps the medicine go down, medicine go down, medicine go down...’” I sang trailing off quickly to his blank look. “It means you'll have a good trip, guaranteed.”

He'd never heard of Mary Poppins nor of a spoon full of sugar for a good trip but he brought the sugar bowl and a spoon from the kitchen.

I savored the graininess of the sugar on my tongue while it slowly melted and slipped down my throat. I knew the idea of sugar protecting me from a bad trip was all in my head, which I found more a confirmation of the power of thought than the surrender to denial. To me it meant I was the one who was always in control.

He didn't try the sugar but took out his pipe instead. "This will guarantee a good trip." He toked deeply.

"We should go out. We can come back here later." He offered me the pipe but I turned it down. So far I'd never had a bad trip. Some people hadn't been so lucky, like Terry, a pretty girl from school that I ran into at parties. Seeing her now always made me think of Gollum in "The Hobbit." She had turned pale and haggard and was always looking over her shoulder with eyes that seemed as big as saucers. She told me that they stayed dilated all the time. I didn't want to take a chance on mixing his hash and Orange Sunshine too.

"You sure Jim doesn't care if I stay here tonight?"

"No. He won't be home anyway."

I had told my mother I was spending the night with Twila. She never checked up on me.

Though I never knew what caused them, my favorite instant was the rushes. Some people said it was the speed that they cut the acid with rather than the actual LSD. Whatever it was, it came like a whoosh of oxygen exploding into every single cell, which instantly caused a sudden loss of any sense of gravity. After the initial rush, a buzzing began in my brain that made me feel hotwired to every sound and movement around me. Finally, it would settle to a point that I felt so soft as I moved through the air, that it felt like I was brushing through satin. Once I had tried to describe the feeling to a friend and all that I could come up with was that I felt like a perfect porcelain doll in a pure soft universe, no pain, no sadness, immersed in the sea of joy that Eric Clapton sang of on my *Blind Faith* album.

Kenny's arm was over my shoulder, when my first rush came. I wondered if he felt me suddenly rise off the ground because he stopped dead. Giggles were backing up into my chest. I had the feeling he wouldn't find them as entertaining as my other friends used to.

He looked at me quizzically. "What happened?"

I was grinning, I think, like a Cheshire cat. "Can you wiggle your ears?"

“What?”

“Wiggle your ears. Look.” I wiggled my ears just like my grandfather used to.

“Where’d you learn that?” He couldn’t help but smile, a crack in what I was beginning to realize was his naturally somber demeanor. I am sure I looked pretty goofy too.

“Last year, in St. John’s. I was tripping in the very back seat of the city bus and it hit a bump and I started to laugh because I thought I was going to float away if I didn’t hang on and I was smiling so hard that my ears began to wiggle.”

He continued to smile like he was noticing something new about me. He took out a cigarette and offered me one. The burst of flame that leapt from the tip of his thumb as it connected with the match was startling. The way it lit his face, I suddenly thought how much of a stranger he really was. I took a deep drag from my cigarette thinking of the advice a friend had once given me about these anxious moments. “Just find a quiet spot and have a smoke.” I took another drag and blew it into the icy air, wispy, electric trails spiraling behind. The moment passed. I smiled. “Happy trails to you, until we meet again.” It was what we used to sing in St. John’s at the end of every concert, an old Dale Evans and Roy Rogers tune that a British band called the “Lords of London” had turned into cult song. I hoped it would come true someday and I would see my friends once again.

“What do you see right now?” He asked.

“What?”

“What do you see?”

“I don’t know?” I strained my eyes to focus in the darkness. I knew I could turn it into anything. Conjuring images out of visual suggestions was half the fun of tripping. But I wondered what it was he wanted me to see.

“Listen. What do you hear?”

“Tires crunching on the snow, TVs, radios, dogs barking.”

“The trees breathing?” He had his hand on the trunk of a barren maple that seemed more dead than alive. I looked hard at him to see if I could tell if he was tripping too. His self-control was still apparent but he looked different, taller, engaged somehow with the natural landscape, like he was part of it. A shiver ran through me.

“Here,” he said taking my hand and placing it on the bark.

We must have stood there for a long time because even though every cell in my body was in motion, my feet were starting to feel numb from the cold. But I couldn’t move. The longer we stood there the more the landscape came alive. Neon colored veins were running from the tree’s roots to its branches and not just of that tree but of all the trees that lined both sides of the street. The lane was a blaze of color and light—like a blacklight poster—like somebody had plugged it in to an electric outlet.

After a long while, the tree shuddered and expanded ever so slightly under my palm. I almost jumped back and goosebumps shot up my arm. But I followed Kenny’s lead, silent observation.

Kenny’s trailer was a warm and welcome relief from the frigid night. My nose, toes and fingers were half frozen though I barely noticed. He turned on a dim light in the living room, put Hendrix on the record player and brought back a sandwich and a Coca Cola from the refrigerator that we shared. I pulled off my boots and buried my toes in the avocado colored shag carpeting. He took out his pipe again and toked some more hash. I joined him. The weight of gravity was beginning to tug at me. My most un-favorite part of tripping—coming down.

“You can sleep here,” he said pointing to the couch. I was disappointed, hoping we would be sleeping together. But he didn’t leave. Instead, he asked me to brush his hair, which I did slowly and carefully, reveling in its texture and color. Then I wove it into two thick braids. When I was finished, he shook them loose and then pulled me to him. We kissed for a long time, his hands up my shirt, though there wasn’t much there to feel. I didn’t apologize like I did

with my first lover. For some unknown reason, my breasts had refused to grow. It was something I was beginning to accept about myself. I figured it was better if my lovers accepted it too than try to hide it.

Before long, we were both lying on the couch and he was unbuckling my belt and unbuttoning my jeans. He pulled them and my panties to my ankles but didn't take them off. He pulled my shirt up but didn't take it off either. He took off his shirt and lay between my bare legs with his chest and belly pressed to mine, his raven hair forming a tent around my face, caressing my neck and cheeks while we continued to kiss. His skin was soft and smooth against mine and even though he was thin, the muscles of his arms, shoulders and back rippled under my fingers. I heard the rat tat tat of "Machine Gun" on the stereo and then the screaming of the guitar that sounded like people dying and then planes falling from the sky. Jimi had dedicated it to the soldiers dying in Chicago and Michigan and Vietnam. It sounded like the TV in my living room, images of children screaming under the scorch of napalm, young men getting their brains blown across asphalt--every evening on the 6 o'clock news. It sounded like my mother and father fighting. It sounded like the end of the world. It would be the song that would forever transport me to that precious first night with Kenny. It was the end and the beginning--our song, for all time.

He pressed his hips hard against me for a long time before he finally unbuckled his belt and unbuttoned his jeans. He wasn't wearing any underwear. I closed my eyes as he got up to reset the stereo. Then I heard him pulling his jeans down. He lay between my thighs and pressed into me. I was more than ready, wet and waiting for him. He moved hard, silently, then stiffened, then went limp in my arms. We lay there like that for some time before he rolled off and used a Kleenex to wipe himself.

We didn't talk about what had just happened, as if it was something that happened outside us. I think I was his first. Maybe that was why he didn't pull out of me just before he cli-

maxed and let the creamy droplets fall onto my belly like my first lover had. And he didn't ask me to take odd positions, make noises and move around more like my second lover had. He didn't ask me if I enjoyed it or was he any good, or about my other lovers or if I was using birth control, though I would tell him later I was on the Pill. I didn't climax though I knew I could have with a little more time. But that was OK. I would satisfy myself some other time in the quiet of my bedroom.

These thoughts did not crowd my mind that night. Only the warmth of his skin and the weight of his arms around me mattered.

Redressed, we cuddled in silence on the couch for a while.

"I don't want to live in this fucked up world," he said softly.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I don't plan on being here long."

Somehow, his words didn't alarm me, but rang with a truth I already knew. We were both lost, for different reasons, but nonetheless adrift in a doomed world. We only had now between us.

Dawn revealed us as lovers wrapped in each other's arms and that was all I wanted. The trails had disappeared and Jimi's guitar faded into silence. Sleep then took us both.



Missoula

1971

CHAPTER 17

“Twilight is the crack between the two worlds. It is the door to the unknown...There is the door. Beyond there is an abyss and beyond that abyss is the unknown.”

The Teachings of Don Juan, Carlos Castenada

Greenough Park was the twilight we slipped through as often as we could, guided by the little orange pill with the perfect name, Orange Sunshine. Others seemed to understand too what Greenough really was, because just as soon as the snow was gone, the Sixties finally made it to Missoula via a whole nation of Californians who were out on the road. They came to Greenough in beat up Volkswagen mini vans and old school buses covered in flower power stickers or wildly painted designs, their 8-track tape players and surround sound speakers blaring “Whole Lotta Love,” and “Ina Gadda Da Vida.” They came with dogs wearing railroad handkerchiefs around their necks that could catch Frisbees in mid-air. They came wearing beaded headbands, love beads, gypsy skirts, and sandals or just went barefoot, the guys usually shirtless or wearing leather vests with dirty patched up bell-bottoms. There was fringe, free love, and music everywhere and they were high on everything from God to crystal methadrine to LSD.

The whole scene disgusted Kenny, another invasion of white people who had screwed up their own country and were coming to take what was left of Montana. I secretly admired their carefreeness and lack of modesty and often fantasized about hopping into one of those wild vehicles and escaping Missoula, living on the road somewhere. Images from the Woodstock movie—tripping, skinny-dipping, dancing—drove my fantasy. What could be so wrong with a nation of peace and flower power? It seemed a lot better deal than trying to change the world the way my father believed it could be changed. Hadn’t he proved himself

wrong? I wanted to belong to these free spirits drifting across America, to something. To anything.

I didn't tell Kenny what I was thinking but followed him silently as we slipped by the parked vans and the couples making out in the grass, and made our way first to the established trails and then off into the wild brush. He always walked with his head up, looking not to look into the faces of passersby, but above them. I walked that way too now, and saw things I had never seen before.

"Forget where we came from and see where we are," he said to me once we found a quiet place to sit. His words flowed in a clipped singsong, a rhythmic dialect I was beginning to recognize as peculiar to the reservation. To me, it was another of his parables, drifting in between leaves and time. They seemed to carry so much meaning, but when I tried to think about them harder, they'd always dissolve away.

I asked him once if his words had come from traditions passed on to him by family, a custom I had read about. But he never answered. Those lines had been cut by some dark thing he would never speak of. I imagined it had something to do with his father. He told me once that he had been a U S soldier and drunk himself to death. He never spoke of his mother.

Fascinated, I watched as his arm hairs strained erect like rows of delicate insect feelers probing the air. The tone of his skin shifted to red earth, his dark eyes floating in a liquid inner lid, and his raven hair more blue. Lines blurred between his form and the backdrop of trees. He became not Kenny in faded blue jeans and a sky-blue tie-dyed t-shirt but Kenny in camouflage. Not Kenny of flesh and blood, but particulate matter.

Then he seemed to forget me, leaving me sitting there with his body while his spirit soared through some other universe. Still, though we felt so far from civilization, it took a while for the reality of the urban roar to fade. Soon it was replaced with the subtext just below it—

owls screeching on the hunt, falcons screaming in the mountain updrafts, field mice rummaging for food, the steady roar of the creek rushing over boulders, the dead heat amplified by the persistent rustle of parched leaves and brittle needles, insects vibrating fragile wings, resonating like the papery skins of drums. I was vibrating too, merging, connecting with the hidden universe moving under the carpet of pine needles. Fingers of air wrestled, bowing branches, tingling leaves like a symphony playing in a key just beyond earshot. Then the familiar sensation of porcelain skin brushing through satin, a rush of oxygen, lungs lifting skyward. Time forgot us both and left us drifting, our shadows marking the movement of the sun from day to night.

Most moments were lost to the blur of time but there were lucid ones too. Near us, a decayed log was slowly being digested by large termites. Kenny took a package of red licorice out of his pocket, tore a stick into pieces and made a licorice trail alongside the log. They soon discovered it, their mighty bodies lifting the gargantuan pieces of candy and carting them off to their nest.

Another moment came when a large yellow swallowtail butterfly brushed past us, fluttering erratically. Kenny held out his hand and it landed lightly on his finger, pressing its wings up and down. I had read the myth of a magical brave who could call the butterflies. I was beginning to believe the true illusion was the world I got out of bed in every morning.

CHAPTER 18

“Walk me down to school baby,
Everybody’s acting deaf and blind,
until they turn and say,
‘why don’t you stick to your own kind.’”
Society’s Child, Janis Ian.

Kenny liked to walk with his shirt off on hot days so when he showed up at my house, my mother noticed it right away. When I came downstairs, he was sitting on the edge of the dining room table and she was stroking his back with her fingers, or maybe he had asked her to scratch it. I doubted it, though he didn’t seem to mind.

I tried not to think too much about it. Over the months I had known him, she had managed to lure him into her kitchen a few times to eat cake and drink milk. She always knew what to talk about. With my girlfriends she talked about Women’s Lib and with Kenny, she talked about the American Indian Movement. He fell under the same spell all my friends did; of thinking my mother was cool.

She smiled at me when I came down and said, “You have a beautiful young man here.”

When we got to the sidewalk, Kenny asked me if I could see any split ends in his hair. His sudden interest in his appearance annoyed me.

“You got a few,” I said as he ran his fingers through his hair.

“I have to buy another bottle of ‘Protein 21,’” he said tossing his hair coyly. “Let’s go to my house first,” he said putting his arm over my shoulder, my annoyance fading with his touch. Like usual, he slid his hand inside my shirt fondling my nipple as we walked. A couple passed us on the same sidewalk, flashing faces of shock and disgust. Their looks made me remember that I hadn’t told Kenny yet what had happened at school.

“Hey, injun lover. Heard you got an injun boyfriend,” a cousin had jeered at me in the school hallway.

“So. It’s none of your business,” I answered.

“Yeah. Somebody’s gonna get hurt,” he had added not smiling. Lifting his hand he formed it into a gun and made a clicking noise with his mouth, and then had formed “pow” with his lips.

“You don’t know what they call us here, do you?” Kenny said when I told him. We had made it back to his trailer and were sitting at the kitchen table. He had been searching various niches for stems and seeds to smoke and was shaping a small pile of them on the table. He had already scraped all his pipes for the sticky black resin that accumulated in the pipe and smoked it. He always did that near the end of the month, when he ran out of hash. It was too strong for my lungs so I didn’t join him.

“What?”

“Dogs.”

“Do you think they really mean dog as in dog?” I asked not really understanding. I had read that during the Indian Wars the Crow had helped the US Army track down renegade Sioux. The trackers were called “dog soldiers,” and because of their cooperation, the Crow were able to negotiate prime land for their reservation, unlike the Sioux.

“That’s a mother fucking lie,” Kenny said. “You’re so damned white. It doesn’t matter how all that happened. Don’t you understand, ‘the only good Indian is a dead Indian’ applies to all? I told you that the first day we met. They call us dogs. They treat us like animals. They’ll kill you for just looking at a white girl.”

He stared out the living room window of the singlewide trailer where he lived with Jim and his sister, Rainey. Outside a barren, dusty, flat place, marked by other run-down trailers,

some with broken down cars in the driveway. There were no trees or sidewalks. No grass, decorative fences or flower pots. Not like my house, a large two-story 1920s bungalow that my mother had decorated tastefully and with a fenced yard my father cut once a week. It was in a clean, quiet, middle class neighborhood ordered by sidewalks and shaded by ancient maples and elms.

Somehow I had misinterpreted people's reactions. I thought they were shocked by our sexual openness, not really by the contrast of our skin. But my cousin's reaction and Kenny's chilling words had added sudden meaning to stares and the expressions of disgust. It made me think Kenny really did have a death wish. But I had to have meant more to him than that. He was not only willing to defy the whole city of Missoula but Jim and his sister too. They didn't like him dating a white girl either.

Later, after we left his trailer, I wondered why he was even with me and when he guided me into the bushes in a small park near my house and unbuckled my belt and unbuttoned my jeans, in surge of desperation, I pulled him to me with an eagerness I hadn't yet revealed. I unbuttoned his jeans as mine fell around my ankles. Then I plopped into the dirt, pulling him down on top of me. Instead of lying there quietly, I arched and rolled my hips, grinding hard against his pubic bone. If he wasn't going to give me what I wanted I was going to show him how I could take it.

He pumped back creating a rhythm between us that brought me to climax. I think we even came at the same time. Surely he had felt it too? Panting, I looked into his face to see his reaction and there was none. Soon, he pulled up his pants and stood offering me his hand. His hair, a black mantle spreading across his shoulders, hanging on his bare brown chest. Sunlight filtered around him like some kind of aura. The sight took my breath away and made me feel miserable all at the same time. He was a beautiful young man. I wanted more of him, but how?

Once dressed, we sat on the park bench for a while. “Did you feel anything different?” I asked him haltingly.

“No,” he said dragging on a cigarette like he always did after sex.

“It was really good.” I said emphasizing “really.”

“Women don’t enjoy sex,” he said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You know, they don’t come. Just men.”

I was stunned and embarrassed both. How could he say that? The *birth control handbook* stated that women desire and enjoy sex as much as men do. And what about my own experience? Could I deny that? But the evidence was weighing against me. My other two lovers hadn’t asked if I had an orgasm, nor tried to make me have one. They were even older than Kenny and more experienced. I must have missed something somewhere. Maybe there was something wrong with me.

“Come on,” he said, “Let’s go shopping.”

Shopping meant he had gotten his check, part of the US government payoff negotiated in a long ago treaty that every member of the Crow Nation received in exchange for land and peace. Shopping meant peace, for both of us, was close at hand. Soon we would be drifting again and nothing would matter. My shame and confusion would float into that same abyss that held my rage and sadness. Soon I would feel nothing. He put his arm around my shoulder and headed in the direction of the nearest dealer, someone who lived in my neighborhood.

“There’s no robins this spring,” he said as we walked.

“How do you know?” I asked looking around trying to spot one.

“I’ve been watching for them. They didn’t come. It’s a bad sign.” He said pulling me closer to him.

CHAPTER 19

The right to...use our own bodies as we desire, is a most basic, essential human right, a right that has long been denied us. ...The pleasure of sex without fear of pregnancy or moral sinfulness continues to be denied, especially to women, because of the repression of such knowledge and experience. birth control handbook, Cherniak & Feingold

I came home from school one day to my mother sitting on my bed. Shoulders hunched and looking like something had just knocked the wind out of her, she was holding my birth control pills in her hand. My room smelled of Mr. Clean and Endust meaning she had just transformed it from the piles of dirty clothes, messed up beds and dishes crusted with food that my sister and I had left that morning. It was once again a girls' room of orange and yellow flowered wallpaper, matching orange trim, accented with mustard yellow bed frames and rose colored dressing tables she had made from an old Victorian dining room table that she had cut in half. That also meant my laundry was probably washed and folded in my dresser and my ironed clothes hanging in my closet.

My mother lived by the belief that if everything was clean and in order, everything was OK. And she made it so with the force of her pure will and the legacy of elbow grease she had inherited from her Irish mother. From dawn to dusk every day she had efficiently managed five children, a husband, and a two-story house not to mention moving her household from state to state, province to province and back again as well as a recent political campaign. She fell into her bed each night in total exhaustion. It seemed strange she never demanded help from us, two able-bodied teenage daughters. I tried to remember why, but only memories of childish inadequate efforts to do chores preempted by my mother's quick and capable hands offered any explanation. When I asked her later how she managed it all those years, she had said flatly, "It wasn't me."

I know now, that we depended on her desperately to make it look OK as much as she

did. And even at that, me, my sister and my brother Tommy and even my father were unraveling her vision faster than she could stitch it back together. At eleven, Tommy was on the verge of being sent to reform school. My sister and I had grown completely wild, skipping school, doing drugs, sneaking out all night, activities that she tended to overlook. My father had grown despondent and increasingly hard to live with. How my two youngest brothers, Eric, 5, and David, 6, were faring I'll never know but I can trust that my mother was probably able to keep them safe within their childish bubble through those years.

Plainly, there were things wrong in this house that we never spoke of. There were things wrong in my life that I couldn't figure out by myself. Like why did I feel so desolate every time I walked into my gleaming, spotless room. It was as if something of me had been swept away with the crumbs and the dust, something denied.

"I was looking for drugs," she said quietly, "and found these." I flushed angrily thinking the snitch was a relative, or even the school counselor who had taken me in her office to "rap" one day about my falling grades and skipping class. She had asked me point blank if I was doing drugs. "No," I had said to her with the straightest face possible.

"Where did you get these?" My mother asked timidly. Her smooth, creamy face was lined with exhaustion, her large blue eyes darkened with worry. I knew that discussing female things was difficult for her. When I had my first period, she had handed me a Kotex and a sanitary belt through the bathroom door without discussion. Thankfully, I knew what was happening to me from Health class. Up to that point in my life, though my father roamed the house nude and felt free to discuss sexually intimate subjects in front of us, I had rarely even seen my mother naked.

"Planned Parenthood," I answered explaining that they were free. I didn't tell her about

the pregnancy scare I'd had before I met Kenny or that even though I knew all about intercourse from the *birth control handbook*, it hadn't solved the problem of actually getting birth control or the realities of discussing it with a lover.

I didn't tell her of the agonizing vigil, waiting for my period or my first experience laying naked on a table in a chilly room with my legs spread wide while the doctor pushed a cold metal instrument into my body. When I tensed up, he had said, "If you're this tense, you shouldn't be having sex." I wanted to ask him how this was like sex but I felt too ashamed.

"You're having sex with Kenny?"

"Yes."

"What about Scotty?"

"Yes. I did." I answered about my first lover.

My answers seemed to be an unbearable weight that compressed her further into herself until she looked more like a sad little girl than my mother. She was just barely thirty-two and I was going on seventeen. We had practically grown up together.

"I tried to take the Pill, but I couldn't. It made me sick. It can cause embolisms. Women have died," she said softly. I remembered when she had tried the Pill. It had come up in a fight between my parents. My father did not want to deal with birth control at all, even after five kids. The Pill made her sick. I also remember Father Gilman, the priest she confided in back when she still went to church. He was against her taking it. She had come home from confession crying. She left the church not long after that.

"The doctor said they are safer now. Plus I am not sick. They don't affect me at all," I said trying to sound as convincing as possible. I didn't know exactly why, but I knew I didn't want to end up like my mother. I would make sure, I had vowed. I hadn't missed a pill yet.

Handing me the packets of pills, she sighed. I had hoped she would congratulate me for being so mature. But if she was thinking it, she didn't say.

“Are you going to tell Dad?”

“No,” she said. “I won’t tell him.” And I believed her because she always covered for me—most of the time that is. Keeping secrets from him was another way to make it all OK. But this time she told.

CHAPTER 20

Didn't I make you feel like you were the only man -yeah!
Didn't I give you nearly everything that a woman possibly can ?
Honey, you know I did!
And each time I tell myself that I, well I think I've had enough,
But I'm gonna show you, baby, that a woman can be tough.
I want you to come on, come on, come on, come on and take it,
Take it! Take another little piece of my heart now, baby!
Oh, oh, break it.
Piece of my Heart, Janis Joplin

My father was a different person in a suit, the public man confident, reasonable, in control. He had just arrived from the airport, a job interview at Kent State, wearing a new suit. It was plain Navy with narrow lapels—no pinstripes. His tie was no longer loud and wide, but narrow and decorated with *fleur de lis*. He had also shaved his sideburns and his moustache and the hair he had once grown long to comb over his bald spot was clipped close to the scalp.

I watched him pace from his bedroom to the hall through the grate in my bedroom floor as he related his experience in Ohio to my mother. He had interviewed in the wake of the National Guard opening fire on students during a protest over troops in Cambodia. Four students had been killed. He seemed disturbed and I heard him say he wouldn't take the job even if it were offered. I was surprised and relieved. Surprised because it seemed like the perfect place for him amidst all that controversy. Relieved because we wouldn't be leaving Missoula anytime soon and maybe even never.

I strained my ears to hear if my mother had told. But when my father called me downstairs, I knew she had.

My parents' bedroom was the discipline room. It was furnished with a matching heavy, dark, Victorian bed, dresser and chifarobe that my mother had refinished. Though the room was

always clean and orderly, it was neutral, austere, like a nun's cell, for some reason missing my mother's warm decorative touch.

I sat on the edge of their bed, my eyes on his shiny Florsheims pacing the wooden floor. I remembered when he bought them. Along with the suits, ties, dress shirts, they cost more than my mother's entire wardrobe, which was made up of a few dresses and a couple of pair of shoes that she had worn ever since I could remember. Up until then, those tiny inconsistencies in our lives had always had explanations that made sense. It had made sense that my father had expensive clothes and shoes and my mother wore her clothes until they were threadbare. He was important. His needs were important. More important than all of us put together.

I hadn't been in this room for a while. These days it was mostly Tommy behind this door with him. I had almost forgotten what it felt like for the door to close with a click and for me to be face to face with my father. My mouth went dry.

"Your mother tells me she found your birth control pills? When did you start taking them?" Surprisingly, there was something other than anger in his voice.

I was holding *Ramparts* in my hand. I had hoped he'd notice. But he didn't.

His demeanor confused me. My mind raced to interpret it. Maybe it was because he was no longer seeing the girl I once was, with the upside-down Pippi Longstocking braids. In those days I had hung in the corners of the many living rooms we had lived in fetching ash-trays, coffee, food and beer while his friends and students argued politics. As I got older, I had devised ways to engage him, asking questions, listening for hours to ideas and words that I could barely grasp. He liked that I stayed attentive, didn't talk back and always tried to please him. The girl I was had worshiped him as much as I feared him—the omnipotent and the all-knowing, just like God, only he didn't believe in God, which had made him seem all the more powerful.

Maybe he was seeing the woman I was becoming, who could think for herself, and who could recognize a world full of contradictions and flawed adults. I wanted desperately to be in control of my own life, to shed my girlish skin. The woman I was becoming wanted him to see me and listen to me for a change.

“None of your goddam business.” I threw the magazine on the floor and flashed my eyes defiantly daring him to land the blow that I was sure would come.

He didn’t move, didn’t say a word, just picked up the magazine, rolled it in his hand and stood there.

“How did you get them and why you are taking them? Are you having sex?” He said still calm. Maybe he remembered that he gave me the *birth control handbook* in the first place. Maybe he would congratulate me for being so responsible.

“No,” I lied with a calmer voice suddenly realizing that it wasn’t the Pill that was upsetting him but the sex. I remembered hearing Grandma Helen tell how her daughter-in-law was slipping birth control pills into my cousin’s orange juice every morning without her knowing it, “just in case.”

“I started taking them just in case. I got them at Planned Parenthood for free.”

“You’re lying. You’re having sex. I can always tell when you’re lying. Your mouth is dry.” He unbuttoned his jacket and took it off.

“No I’m not,” I said licking my lips trying to drum up some saliva. I hated the way he could see into me, or at least make me feel that he could. “Some friends of mine suggested I go with them and while I was there, I figured what the heck...” I shrugged my shoulders.

“What the hell’s wrong with you?” His voice jumped a notch. Face flushing crimson, the vein in his neck bulging with blood and his jaw muscles flexing as he ground his teeth. From between his scowling lips emerged the dirty tooth in the center of his lower jaw. My resolve shrank instantly at the sight, his rage a terrible and familiar wall growing between us.

“You’re a whore. You’re just like Sonja. You’re a whore just like my sister, just like my mother.” He spit the words at me.

A shock of confusion went through me. I’d heard the stories about his mother a dozen times over, her obsession with horses and brutal men. But my namesake, Sonja? His dead sister? She was fifteen when she died, the same year I was born. She had been a diabetic. When I was ten, her mother, my grandmother had given me Sonja’s beautiful western style tooled leather belt. It was embellished with lovely leaves and rosettes, her name, which was my name now, carved in the center. The buckle was a large silver oval with an “S” engraved on it. I couldn’t remember if I had ever seen a picture of her.

“You know why she’s dead? She screwed the whole high school football team. When your grandfather found out, he kicked her out of the house, beat her and sent her back to my mother. When she got there, my mother’s boyfriend tried to rape her. She ran away, into a snowstorm, got pneumonia, died of kidney failure at the hospital.” His voice caught slightly at the end of the story as if he might cry. But I knew he wouldn’t.

“Stand-up.”

I obeyed instantly. He poked his finger hard into my chest several times, ranting about his mother and how I would turn out just like her. His face was so close to mine, his breath was hot on my skin. Then he balled up his fist and punched me in the stomach.

My stomach went into instant spasms, but I didn’t cry. They would pass. I held my arms across my belly waiting for his next move and suppressing the urge to run. I had run once and he had made me sorry. There were certain things you just didn’t do.

“You’re going to end up just like her.” He unbuttoned his shirt and rolled up his sleeves pacing the room. Pulling his belt out of the loops he held it in his hands, snapping it, grimacing, as if trying to decide what to do next.

“Go to the dining room,” he commanded. The dining room meant that the physical danger was past. But knowing what was coming, I would have preferred the belt. Pulling a chair away from the table he sat me in it, and paced around and around it looking at me with disgust, shaking his finger at me.

“You’re worthless. You’re going to end up dead or in mental institution.” He gritted his teeth, seething breaths hissing between them.

“What are you going to do with your life, huh? Screw men, use them like my mother, like my sister? What are you going to do when you grow up, be a prostitute?”

They were trick questions with no real answers. Still he insisted, pounding his fist on the table and screaming, “answer me.”

I had recently published my trilogy poem in the school literary journal. I hadn’t told anyone or even bothered to get a copy.

“A poet, a writer.”

“A poet, are you nuts. You’ll never make it as a poet or a writer. What have you written?” I thought of the pile of his stationary next to my typewriter, filled with my poems and journals and suddenly panicked at the thought he might see them. They would become more ammunition against me.

“Nothing.” I focused on a knot in worn wooden arm of the chair. If I narrowed my eyes I could turn it into a bird with its head tucked into its wing or the figure of a woman bending over. Eventually, my father’s voice would become a drone, the room would go soft and turn pan—everything muffled, even his purplish face would drift disembodied.

From a safe vantage point in the room, I could watch a man scream at a plain thin girl, huddled in a Victorian dining room chair, her long brown hair hanging over her face. The man and the girl could easily be actors at this point, rehearsing a script they’ve rehearsed a hundred times before.

Man: “You’re worthless—useless—despicable. You don’t deserve anything. Right?

Aren’t you? Aren’t you?” Slams fist on table.

Girl: “Yes.”

Camera: Close-up on tears running down face.

Director: “Cut. Sound with tears please, make us believe it.”

Girl: “OK, I’ll work on that. But this whole scene, it’s just hard to believe myself.

Where’s his motivation? I think she should not be showing any emotion, just become numb, invisible, you know, disassociated. Maybe you could have this digital ghost come out of her body and have the camera shoot from the ceiling, you know a hovering effect.”

Director: “Hold up with the psychobabble, sci-fi shit. His motivation, you know, the bad childhood, hates his mother, hates women, man against legacy of failure, rises against great odds, crushed by his own limitations, a man who can never stop being who he really is, man against himself...blah, blah, blah.”

Girl: “But how does the girl figure into all that? He has the motivation to become a raving maniac; even a candidate for a mental hospital but what he’s saying to her has nothing to do with her. He’s not even really talking to her is he?”

Director: “You’re right, she doesn’t matter at all in the scheme of things. She’s the whipping post, but don’t worry, trust me, trust the writer, it will all come out in the end. Just play your heart out sweetie. Roll.”

Camera: Move in as scene closes, the dining room turns to shadows, girl disappears into shadow, father’s silhouette takes shape from the dusk showing through the window behind him. See shoulders drooping, head hanging. Pan back, girl slips up the stairs. She watches through the grate in her floor for the lights to go out and her father’s bedroom door to close. She creeps out the back door, through dim streets, to her lover’s house. They walk the city streets all night,

drinking apple wine and fascinated by the thousands of Miller moths laying like shiny gray blankets over store windows, neon signs, and streetlights—anywhere there is light.

Lover: To the girl, “The moths. It’s because of the robins, you know.” Takes a swig of wine.

Director: “Cut, cut. Can we do that again? What about the moths, can we do that again? Get the moth grip over here. Who’s got the nets.”

CHAPTER 21

One pill makes you larger
And one pill makes you small,
And the ones that mother gives you
Don't do anything at all.
Go ask Alice
When she's ten feet tall.
White Rabbit, Jefferson Airplane

Charisse never could hold her liquor or her grass, not like me. I'd always had an uncanny ability to become instantly straight, sober-acting in extreme situations, so much so in those situations, like around family or at school, people rarely noticed I was stoned.

For her, maybe it was because once she started drinking, she wouldn't or maybe couldn't stop, especially with sweet wine. That must have been why she didn't think before she picked up an open gallon of Bali Hai at a party one night and guzzled quite a bit before she finally put it down. Somebody must have warned her it was electric, spiked with acid, or maybe they didn't. Things like that happened at parties, somebody thinking it would be funny to get the whole world stoned. But maybe even if they had told her, it was likely she didn't realize the implications. She tended to follow, a habit she got into from being my little sister.

I wasn't there that night. Though we sometimes got stoned together, I had Kenny and she had her own friends now, friends she managed to spend week-ends with while our mother thought she was at supervised slumber parties.

She stumbled into our bedroom at dawn one Sunday, after being out all week-end, her hair a wild matted mess, her eyes as big as moons. She stood in the doorway, looking at me for a few moments, her body trembling. Then she fell into a heap on the floor sobbing.

"I can't stop it. I want it to stop."

“What’s wrong?” I asked startled especially by the tears. In between sobs, she gave disjointed pieces of the story. She was still tripping and had been all week-end. She didn’t know how much acid she had taken. She looked at me with eyes full of tears, her pupils so big they made her look like those sad little girl caricatures in go-go boots and mini skirts that I used tape to my walls when I was thirteen.

I didn’t know what to do. Whenever I felt out of control when I was high, I had always been able to get back into control. What was the antidote for a bad trip? Then I was worried our father would hear her and then it could get much worse.

And then there were the tears. Tears were never shared between us. I guess that was why I didn’t get out of bed, hold her, stroke her hair and help her get undressed and into her bed. I just watched her shivering as she pulled off her clothes, her skinny, pale body with her bent back, glowing from the sunrise filtering in the window. She lay in her bed stiffly, staring at the ceiling, eyes so wide open they refused to shut, probably watching the orange and yellow flowered wallpaper garden grow.

I don’t know when she finally fell asleep, but she was still in bed that evening and when I left for school the next morning, she told me to tell our mother on the way out the door she was sick.

I asked her later what had happened, on her bad trip, but the look of terror that passed over her face made it a subject we never again spoke of.

She was different after that, her eyes a cavern, her face pale and distant. My parents barely noticed the change probably because she stayed out of the way as much as possible—attaining, she would later explain, the final stages of her “invisibility.”

That didn’t help her though the day she fell off a westbound Milwaukee Road freight. The railroad bull (cop) saw her plain as day running with a bunch of scraggly dressed long hairs

as they all scrambled alongside the train as it was picking up speed in the train yard. They were on their way to an outdoor rock concert in Idaho.

They had all managed to hop on and tuck themselves safely onto the floor of an open box car, except for Charisse. The railroad bull reported that she hung on for awhile and then her hands slipped, luckily, her body falling into the gravel instead of under the train wheels.

I still try to picture the scene, her skinny fingers holding the rusty rung of the ladder, trying to pull herself up, her long blond hair that she kept in tiny braids at night, unbound now, a glorious, golden mane, swinging, her head swinging, her body swinging with the pitch of the boxcar, going faster and faster, her little dainty hands slipping, her boots running on air, a wild smile on her face. There is no fear on her face. She isn't scared, no, not a bit. She's loving it, every second of it because she's really thinking that she's getting away. Away...forever...away.

I can imagine her suddenly caught by gravity and slamming into the gravel while her friends wave gaily from the door of the boxcar as it disappears down the tracks.

When the cop got to her, she had stood up unhurt, swinging her fists at him. He soon contained her and had the police haul her off to jail, while she slung foul language at them from the back seat of the squad car she later told me.

Once there, she got her one phone call. My mother answered and when she told my father, "Charisse is in jail," he scowled and said, "Well she can just God damn well stay there."

And she did until they let her out after the week-end. She walked home by herself. I remember she was fourteen that month, going on fifteen. I remember she was never really the same after that. But a lot of things were coming undone, so I don't think anyone really noticed.

CHAPTER 22

Well it's too bad that our friends can't be with us today...
 The machine that we built
 Would never save us that's what they say
 That's why they ain't comin' with us today
 And they also said it's impossible
 For a man to live and breathe underwater
 Forever was a main complaint
 Yeah and they also threw this in my face they said
 Anyway you know good and well
 It would be beyond the will of god
 And the grace of the king...

1983 A Merman I Will Be, Jimi Hendrix

The Big Sky dumped a load of snow on Missoula in July, just before my seventeenth birthday. My father informed us we would be leaving Missoula within a month.

"You'll love Jacksonville," he said amicably at the dinner table one night, his face shining with the elation of a new project. "It's got one of the highest quality of life ratings in the country." He droned on with his usual sales pitch of greener grass with new horizons and better opportunities. Last time it had been how great going into politics would be and how would we love living in Washington, DC. "And we will be finally settling down," he promised glancing at my mother.

"Dad, I can't go. I want to stay," I begged him. "Grandma will let me stay with her, please."

"I suppose you think you're in love. What do you know about love? You're just infatuated," he said.

I had never been in love. It wasn't a word I used or heard often. What I understood when I thought of leaving Kenny was the desperation that made Juliet's blade find her breast. When I thought of leaving him, turning to stone like the mythical Indian girl seemed a more

merciful fate than spending a lifetime without him. How could something that cut so deep be as frivolous as an infatuation?

“Besides,” he added, “Kenny’s just using you.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“White women are the prize in this culture. It’s the same for Kenny as it is for Black men. To possess a white woman is to possess something that the white man owns. He doesn’t love you, he just wants to own you.”

I wanted to scream at him and beat him with my fists. Not only did the soul not exist as far as he was concerned, neither did the heart.

As he droned on, I felt myself becoming a mere shell of myself, moving through the motions of living, but not really alive.

Later that night, just before I sneaked out the back door, I told my mother I was spending the night with Kenny. She only nodded with a set in her jaw that was beginning to put a permanent edge to her prettiness. Maybe it was because I was the same age she was when she married my father. She didn’t try to stop me.

Kenny didn’t say much as we lay in his room under posters of Jimi, his murmuring vocals summing up the ruination of the whole planet. The sentiment was underscored by spacey guitar effects crawling up and down the fake paneling. I imagined Kenny and me walking the beach that Jimi sang of, where he and his love Catherina witness the end of the world but live on reborn through their love.

Kenny struck a match to the deer antler and the knot in my stomach slipped away. We made love and he held me all night while I sobbed until my chest ached and my eyes burned. He didn’t cry. “I knew they would take you away from me,” he said as if some unnamed “they” controlled the world and that loss was the natural and predictable outcome of love. I hated his helplessness and his hopelessness. I wanted him to say, “let’s run away.” But he didn’t.

There was one more thing to do before I left. “I want to climb Mount Sentinel.” I said to him. He nodded. Then we drifted off to sleep, riding Hendrix’ synthetic waves of psychedelia, love and destruction.

CHAPTER 23

Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of earth.
Man did not weave the web of life but is merely a strand in it.
Whatever he does to the web he does to himself.
Chief Seathl of the Suwamish, 1854

I have a dream. I ride a galloping white stallion across a pristine valley. There are no roads, houses, or buildings—just blue mountains tracing a horizon of gray sky on either side. The horse gallops hard, its flanks lathering, chest heaving. It is snorting and foaming at the mouth, steamy breath in the frosty air, hooves beating the frozen ground. Spring slush and soft snow in places.

I feel the labor of the gallop, my heart pumping as if it may burst, my muscles burning. Then I realize I am not riding, I am the horse. Suddenly, a huge owl swoops down from the pale sky and balances itself upon my head, extended wings cutting the air. The colors of its feathers are magnificent. We run as one beast through the valley.

I am on top of Mount Sentinel. I can see the whole valley, lines of mountains disappearing into distant horizon. Far away, a thick, black cloud gains momentum, a churning monster moving through the valley. I feel a sense of destruction, desolation, death as it consumes everything in its path, trees, grass, animals, flowers. I look for a way out. There is nowhere to go as it moves up the mountain towards me.

* * * * *

Kenny moves ahead of me, zigzagging—right then left, making good progress, finding strong footing for his boots. Gravel rolls and slips down the mountain as he tests the next step with a staff made of a tree branch he picked up by the bald eagle aviary at the foot of the moun-

tain. The long black cape I used to wear on the streets of St. John's billows around him, his blue-black hair flying over his shoulders like wings.

I slip, and slide, and slip again, on the shale, the little stones and the clay, clawing and scratching with my hands, fingernails grabbing grass and brush. I find myself on my knees panting again, and again, my breath thick and loud, gravity pulling at my brain. With each successful step up, the mountain grows bigger, and higher, and steeper. My progress is slow, an infernal vibrating of insect wings. I cannot catch up. Cloaked with wings, he doesn't look back—doesn't wait for me.

And then it comes, a sudden lift and flush of oxygen, red blood cells, every follicle erect, catching invisible molecules of color and sound, porcelain skin brushing through satin. The throb of engines below me—the howl and groan of mankind grows distant. We are being lifted away from the madness, I think. The chill wind pulses around me quelled by the caress of sunshine on a china doll's perfect body.

"Can you wiggle your ears?" Grandpa Mongar laughs as he moves his ears up and down, up and down. I giggle. "Yes, Grandpa, watch." The muscles in my scalp pull my ears up and down, up and down. "I can, Grandpa, I can."

He waits for me on the "M." It is seared into the flesh of the mountain like a brand, a claim staked by the town. I think of how the "M" had enchanted me as a child. Then, my father was a poor kid turned idealistic student of political science. He dreamed of politics, and lofty heights. Now, my father's dream of politics and greatness had come crashing down and was gone forever. And now I am finally sitting on top of the "M" mountain.

"Oh," I say to Kenny. "Doesn't look the same up close. Kind of disappointing." He spits sunflower seed husks into the air after he extracts the seeds with his tongue, trails as they spin into the wind.

Hairs on his arms stand straight up. He is shape shifting. He blurs into the backdrop. I wonder if he feels his body changing, but his feelings as always are veiled behind liquid eyes.

I take a Marlboro and a mouthful of sunflower seeds and sit back to look across the expansive vista. We're pretty high up. Across the valley, Anaconda Pulp and Paper Mill chugs away, a dark cloud hanging in the basin. "That's what I saw in my dream," I exclaim. I look around and see mountaintops gashed bald from the clear cutting to feed the mill, a ring around the valley.

"This is the world those greedy assholes down there refuse to see," his words lift into the wind. I understand. The rock I am sitting on heaves a sigh beneath me.

We continue up, another immeasurable lapse of time. At the ridge, we rest again, the scene sublime, a sketch of mountain lines disappearing into its vanishing point, tiny cars, houses, and people milling in erratic patterns, like termites deconstructing the valley. From the aviary far below, a large bird wells into the updrafts and circles above us for several minutes, then lands—a magnificent bald eagle.

It stands for some time, extending its immense wingspan. Finally, it tucks them in and eyes us with a beady orb. I wait for it to speak, but it doesn't. I understand anyway. At this moment we belong to this place. Then, extending its huge wings, it flaps into the wind currents with a flurry of trails and drifts off the mountain.

Just when it seems we have reached the summit, more of the mountain stretches beyond the ridge. Past that, more mountains, like stairs to the Rockies. "I can't believe it!" I exclaim. "There's more mountains. I laughingly sing the answer to the song. "The bear went over the mountain, the bear went over the mountain, the bear went over the mountain and what do you think he saw? He saw another mountain, he saw another mountain..."

Kenny and I follow a rough trail into a high valley splashed brilliant with mountain wildflowers, purple Shooting Stars, Bluebells, yellow Buttercups, and Black-eyed Susans. I

have a sudden vision of nature's perfect symmetry, all things working in intricate patterns, cells, veins, leaves, stems, roots, rock, animals, insects, wind, snow, mountains, the sun and moon, an innate harmony. Man has upset this harmony in the valley. It is dying. This place will not be far behind.

The sun drops quickly at the far end of the valley as we descend. My feet turn leaden with each step. Porcelain skin brushing satin slips away. My heart grows heavier with the pull of gravity. I cannot hold back any longer. Huge, unstoppable tears run down my face and soak my shirt. I step through the twilight back into a world I can neither change nor escape. When I reach the bottom, I catch up to Kenny looking for the comfort of his arms. He sits in a quiet place under a tree diligently scraping his pipe for resin.

EPILOGUE

One of these mornings
You're gonna rise, rise up singing,
You're gonna spread your wings,
Child, and take, take to the sky,
Lord, the sky.
Summertime, Janis Joplin

The day we leave for Florida, my mother snaps a picture. Two pale, spindly-legged girls in shorts lay on the carpet in an empty living room. It's my sister and me and we are telling her, "hell no we won't go," and that she will have to carry us out.

I know these two girls. People used to think they were twins. The older one didn't mind. The younger one followed her like a shadow, the darkness cast over her erasing her piece by piece. Both of them would skip along too for awhile upon the euphoria of chemical numbness, the younger one sinking so far beneath the ethers, she almost disappears, the older one not even remembering the many faces belonging to the hands that would touch her in her fog.

Those two girls I know are laying there still, in that empty living room, hanging onto that last piece of themselves that they think resides there, like ghosts who won't believe they are dead.



Jacksonville

1981

TOMFOOLERY

1. Foolish behavior
2. Something trivial or foolish; nonsense

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CHAPTER 24

1. Pimp Car

We'd been circling the funeral home in Tom's car for an hour, trying to kill a quart of tequila, trying to get up the nerve to park the car and get out and do what we had come to do.

"We gotta go in there sometime. They're going to close," Charisse said as the car rumbled to a stop in the dimly lit parking lot. David, who had been pounding out drum solos on the dashboard for the last twenty minutes, grew suddenly quiet and Eric retreated to his corner of the back seat. The insistent click of the turn signal punctuated the silence.

"No, please, not yet," I said shivering and trying to imagine how Tom's body looked after the Kansas coroner had had it a week. I leaned towards her from the backseat to make sure she'd heard. Charisse looked like a child in the deep, high backed seat. Her head barely even cleared the padded dashboard and she was straining her right foot just to press the gas and the brake. But nobody else had wanted to drive.

Without a word, she set the transmission into reverse and backed out into the street. As she accelerated down the boulevard, David pushed "Infinity" in for another replay. The turn signal finally clicked off as soon as we merged into traffic and Steve Perry's dreamy vocals once again filled the car.

"When the lights go down in the city, and the sun shines on the bay, ooooo I want to be there in my city, ooo whoa oooooo."

Tipping the tequila bottle, I exhaled softly and swallowed a large mouthful. The harsh burn was welcome as it rushed down my throat, seeping quickly into the small of my back and the pit of my empty stomach. I hadn't been able to eat much since I'd heard the news. I had been right in the middle of decorating the Christmas tree with my kids when my father called.

His voice crackling over 4,000 miles of telephone lines was still echoing in my head, “Tom is dead. Tom is dead. Tom is dead.” Thankfully, warm, soft threads were running to my extremities. Soon it would turn to numbness and I wouldn’t be hungry anymore and maybe the echo would stop, too.

“Hey, Charisse. Did you ever notice there was a funeral home across from the ‘Puppy Palace?’ Isn’t that where you used to groom dogs?” I said. She shook her head and then nodded in the rearview mirror. She wasn’t talking much. She wasn’t drinking either.

“God this place has gotten rundown.” I said more to myself. David had grown silent in the front seat and Eric was talking to himself, trying to remember the lyrics to the song.

I watched the familiar bars, corner stores, and gas stations roll by. Jacksonville had been home long enough for me to feel safe here. This neighborhood had even been my old stomping grounds ten years earlier. *Murdered*, I said to myself, pursing my lips, wrapping them around the impossible word. Not died, not killed, murdered. No one had wanted to say it aloud. *My brother passed away. My brother died. My brother was killed. My brother was murdered.* People shrank away when they had heard it as if it was a jinx.

“Hey, what ever happened to ‘Dudes & Chicks’ anyway?” I said trying to think about something else. No one answered. My brothers were probably too young to remember anyway. A sign advertising golden and red boas hung in the window and “Reptile World” on a huge sign above answered my question as we passed the old store.

“Remember balling bags? And that dude with the flower power bus?” I asked, gulping more tequila. “Jesus, anybody got any lemons and salt at least. Stop at that JAX Liquors drive-thru would you?”

“I’d rather not,” she said flatly.

“What? Stop at JAX Liquors or talk about balling bags?”

“Both.” Charisse had preferred to forget those days and pretend they never happened.

Those days for me had been bold and rebellious, ones I liked to reflect on once in awhile now that my life had turned to the routine of kids and a nine to five job. I had bought my first balling bag at “Dudes & Chicks.” I’d never even seen a balling bag until a guy with a wild ‘fro and a middle-aged pot belly had picked us up hitchhiking in a madly painted school bus covered with peace signs and flowers. Inside, there were no seats, just huge, round pillows full of little Styrofoam balls. A sticker on the window had read, “Ass, gas, or grass, nobody rides for free.” I obliged the former when we got to his house without even thinking about it. Charisse and my other friends hung out in the living room while the wild ‘fro guy and I made out his bedroom. Charisse didn’t approve and was even worried about me but I had dismissed her like I usually did. It was 1971, and I was still clinging to the ideals of free love, flower power and peace even though my activities had brought me neither peace nor love.

Then things had changed, mostly things I didn’t regret like a son and then a daughter and a marriage I was managing to hold together. I’d even traded my holey Levis and free spirit philosophy for wash and wear polyester and a job as a bookkeeper at retail lumber store just outside Seattle. Reality, my mother had called it when I ended up pregnant at eighteen and then got married, not for love really, but because I just didn’t know what else to do. “This is life,” she had told me. “and as good as it gets.”

“Give me some of that, would you?” Eric said reaching for the bottle. He gulped it quickly and then sputtered. He had just turned eighteen a couple of weeks earlier.

“Do ya think ‘e can ‘ear us now?” He said assuming his favorite rock star persona, Peter Frampton. “Tom, do ya think e’s watchin’ us?”

“Would you shut the fuck up with that stupid accent?” David’s voice boomed from the front seat as he slammed a large fist on the dash. We’d been talking about Tom all night. It was getting old, especially the closer we got to the funeral home.

Eric held his hands in the air, as if caught red-handed. “Hey man, just havin’ a little fun. Tom would’ve wanted it that way. Right ?” I nodded, not sure I knew what Tom would have wanted. I hadn’t seen him much less Eric and David for at least five years. I was still trying to get used to them towering over me and smelling like men.

“I can see you guys still get along,” I said remembering the morning battle routine when I lived at home. Eric usually woke up singing. David woke up grumpy. Conflict ensued, usually with fists.

“Do you remember when I used to call you ‘roundround’?” I asked Eric, noticing how thin and pale he was, with dark circles under his eyes, his curly hair out of control. He looked at me with his head cocked sideways, making it seem that he wasn’t really looking at me. It brought back the image of a chubby boy dressed in corduroy overalls, padded with diapers who couldn’t keep his balance enough to walk because of his eye condition. He rolled everywhere.

“No,” he said shaking his head. I remember you running out the back door as soon as Mom and Dad left when when you were supposed to be watching us.”

“Yeah!” said David shaking his head in agreement.

“No! That’s not true.” I said remembering the endless games of “So Big,” and “Pattycake,” not to mention reading “Chicken Soup With Rice,” or ‘Where the Wild Things Are,’ or “Winnie the Pooh,” over and over. And what about the diapers, and the hours of entertaining them and keeping them quiet and keeping them from harm. There was a time in my life that is was all about them and they didn’t even remember it.

“You were a baby and we were living in New York, where Dad got his first teaching job at Queens College. Remember the glasses you had to wear? You were so cute,” I said trying to trigger their memory and establish my authority as the big sister.

“Yeah, I was the youngest nerd in history,” Eric said sarcastically, gulping some more tequila.

He was adorable in his miniature pink-rimmed glasses magnifying his tiny blue eyes. He also had to wear a black elastic strap to hold the glasses in place that criss-crossed over tufts of his curly blonde hair. Both the glasses and the operation that followed had failed to fix his “lazy eye” condition. That’s why it always seemed like he was looking somewhere else, a problem which eventually helped shape his wisecracking personality. But now, his out-of-kilter look just added to the out-of-kilter feel of the night.

David had fallen back into the seat, his broad shoulders and thick arms brooding. His face as always, was inscrutable.

“We used to call you ‘Eyeore,’” I teased him, patting his arm with my hand. It was as hard as a rock, probably from his Kung Fu training. He had grown to look just like the man with the golden eyes and handsomely round face that my mother had brought to meet us the year my parents were divorced. When my parents remarried each other, my father had adopted him. While my mother was recuperating in the hospital, my father had taken me aside to explain that David looked different. When he came home from the hospital, I tried to see what he meant and but I couldn’t. He had looked just like a beautiful baby brother to me. For some reason, my parents kept the adoption a secret from him, even in the face of the obvious, a brown-eyed, dark-skinned son amongst four other pale, blue-eyed children. Somehow, it seemed he always knew there was something different about him, growing into a brooding child who kept his feelings to himself and seemed to wake up on the wrong side of the bed every morning. He hadn’t even cried when he’d heard about Tom. “Still water runs deep,” my mother had said. What was going to happen when he finally cracked?

We were all cracking in our own way. Everything had changed for all of us. The funeral home suddenly appeared in the frame of my window, a signless, stucco building with a little drive-thru awning. It didn’t look right. But nothing was right anymore. What could be right

about a murdered brother lying in a box in a funeral home that looked like a drive-in gas station?

But maybe it never was.

2. Wooden Box

He was dressed in flannel pajamas—brown and white stripes—laid out in a plain wooden coffin—no brass handles—no satin interior—no little satin pillow. The smell of room deodorizers—another smell under that—rows of folding chairs—a few stringy wreaths—gaudy foil wallpaper. His body was here—he wasn't. Somebody tried to make us think so, put his skull and face back together—a thick pancake patchwork—little jagged edges of fake skin over his right eye spreading to his cheek—over his forehead. His cute nose that turned up on the end—almost black under the make-up—stuck on his face like it might fall off—tiny holes in his scalp with hair sticking out like a mannequin's—skin draped over his rib cage—collarbone, breastbone protruding—heart, lungs, stomach, intestines in a jar somewhere. That's not Tom—Tom tanned from surfing—Tom grinning—Tom flexing his biceps—Tom cracking jokes. Didn't kiss him—on the forehead—or cheek—or touch him—didn't say, "Hey Tom, it's me—Sonja" didn't say "I love you"—or "I am so, so sorry"—or "Do you remember when you were two and I was seven?—I told you the moon was a cookie"—"Remember Tommy, cookie—Tommy—cookie"—held him up with my skinny arms and tried to help him grab the moon. Couldn't do anything—couldn't talk—just heard myself cry—and cry—feeling outside myself—watching from somewhere else. His hands—his hands—his hands folded at his waist—not folded—clutching—clawing—bones with skin—holding that awful last moment of life—no peace in that body—not like people say—he looked so peaceful—oooh he looked so beautiful—or it's so good his pain is over—nothing like that. He used to suck his thumb—suck his little thumb—twirl his other little finger in my hair—twisting tighter—tighter—tighter—it hurt—it hurt—it hurt.

3. Pimp Car

The car slowed and the turn signal clicked. Through the triangular opera window, I watched as the neighborhood seemed to ooze by. *I shouldn't be afraid. That's just Tommy, my little brother in there, just my little brother.*

I braced myself for the climax of this mounting nightmare. Then, without an explanation from Charisse, the turn signal clicked off, and the car accelerated. None of us objected. Immediately, a couple of souped-up cars revved alongside us. "This car looks like a pimp car," Charisse said disgustedly. "Why did Tommy have a car like this?"

"Hey, this car is bad, fast, a '78 Ford Elite, Chari, do you know what that means?" David protested, suddenly becoming animated over a passion he and Tom had shared. "Tom's got a 350 in this. We could beat those wimps." The jacked-up cherry Chevy roared ahead. "Gimme the wheel Chari, I'll show you," he said grabbing for it.

"Forget it," she said pushing him away. "You're drunk. You're all drunk," Charisse said.

"Come on, we all know why Tom had a car like this. He had to be able to outrun the cops if he had to," Eric piped up.

"What do you mean?" Charisse asked.

"Dad told us he had showed up a few times in Jacksonville on leave from the Army with a couple of duffel bags of pot in his trunk and a wad of cash. And he bragged about impersonating an officer to smuggle pot on the Army air transports. He thought it was a big game."

"Some game," I said.

"Remember when Tom wrecked his Chevy?" David, undaunted, laughed out loud. "He was racing some jock from Parker High. I'm surprised he walked out of that one."

"Yeah, I saw that dude not too long ago. He said he and Tom both hit 110 that night on Monument Road," Eric said bouncing forward in his seat to get closer to David.

David laughed heartily. "Tom's not afraid of anything."

“Yah, and remember when he dropped smoke bombs into the garbage cans in JAX Liquors?” Eric said, “cleared the whole store, fire department, police came the works. Never got caught.”

“Nope, didn’t get caught. Tom’s not afraid of anything,” David said again proudly as if Tom were still alive.

As “Tom the Daredevil” stories grew tall, my two brothers seemed to forget their rivalry. Their laughter filled the car, a welcome relief to the ague that had been hanging in the air.

Tom Stories. I smiled to myself remembering the last time I had seen Tom alive almost five years earlier. He was seventeen. I had left home to get married when he was barely thirteen. He’d grown from a goofy kid with nerdy glasses to a tall, handsome and confident young man. He was posing in the driveway of the house on Eddy Road, pressing two hundred pounds of weight over his head, grinning as the weights flexed his massive biceps. My father couldn’t even mess with him anymore. That must have made Tom feel invincible. I wondered if he ever realized that the way Dad treated him was never about him. I wondered if they had made any peace between them.

Listening to my brothers talk about Tom made me feel the emptiness of my relationship with him. I barely knew him as an adult. The brother I knew by reputation loved the cool adrenaline of fantastic risk. There had been a recent Polaroid Instamatic of Tom in his personal effects that seemed to epitomize him. He was dressed like Flash Gordon, cape and all. The camera lens had cropped out the car roof, making it look like he was flying, Flash Mongar suspended in a blue sky.

Why Tom? Somehow, I had expected it. Somehow, it seemed if any of us would die young, it would be him. The school psychologist had once given us a list of explanations when he couldn’t sit still and couldn’t pay attention in school. 1. He was a “middle child.” 2. He had a brain chemical imbalance and needed medication. 3. He had impulse problems and needed

behavior modification. But there were things the psychologist didn't know, that nobody told. Like, how our father never let up on him, on all of us for that matter. Tom got the worst. Sometimes it seemed he even asked for it. The possibility made me think of a matador, swinging a red cape, playing games with the raging bull, directing the beast away from us, away from our mother. The thought made me shudder, my chest suddenly heavy. I had always just stood by. I didn't do anything. Worse than that, I felt grateful it wasn't me.

The little boy I knew had nine lives if I counted up all the near misses since the day he took his first step. "Just a bunch of tomfoolery," my mother would say after she got over her initial hysteria and found him miraculously ok. He was always running off somewhere.

Like when he was two. He'd wandered into a construction site and got mired in mud up to his hips. His rubber boots probably still stuck to this day under the foundation of that building on the University of Oregon campus. The police brought him home, sockless, smiling, his face smeared with ice cream. He repeated the trick twice more, each time returning home with ice cream and cradled in the arms of a friendly policeman. I always got in trouble too, right along with him. My father had said it was because I was the oldest and I was responsible.

When I'd first heard about him, even though I was a grown woman with kids of my own, my initial thought was, *oh God, I wasn't watching the kids.*

4. A Ghost of Christmas Past

The funeral home returned him to his mother in a small, sealed twelve-inch, by six-inch, by six-inch cardboard box—a mailing label with his name officially typed. As she cradled her son in her arms, she wondered how it was possible to fit a handsome, healthy, six-foot, jokester of a son into such a small space. She bought a large, ornately carved oriental box at an antique store, put the cardboard box inside, and put it in a drawer amongst her collectible knick-knacks and memorabilia. It was all she could do after the priest had refused her son a Catholic burial. He had even said her son had died with a mortal sin on his soul. How could that be?

At least she knew where he was now, she thought as she shut the drawer. No more worrying.

The first Christmas was dismal and too soon after his death but on the second, she took him out and decorated a corner with live, red Poinsettias, tiny, colored blinking lights, and a ceramic nativity. It sat in sight of the kitchen table as her husband, children and spouses, and grandchildren ate Christmas dinner. No one mentioned its presence. No one mentioned him at all.

The next Christmas, she didn't take him out. Not all the family showed up for dinner. Her daughter carefully asked when she would bury him in a graveyard. Her face cramped up, tears welled. No one asked again.

Christmases dwindled. She worried Christmas to a nub. What are you bringing? When are you coming? Call me, she'd remind, and remind, and remind again, and again as she dreamed of the perfect turkey, the perfect holiday table—the perfect kitchen full of the perfect family, lots of perfect pictures of smiling faces, babies underfoot, good smells from the oven, daughters sharing the cooking, presents. Everything would be the way it never was.

But the truth was, nothing was ever going to be the same. There was death and annihilation at the back door, at the bottom of the stairs, running out the front door with a gun. He wore a white beard, a red suit, black knee-high boots, and his belly shook like a bowl full of jelly.

5. Pimp Car

“Can’t we play something else?” Charisse pleaded—weary of Perry’s wailing harmonies. “It’s depressing.”

“Yah, Kansas City Destroyers, Kansas City Destroyers, Kansas City Destroyers,” I chanted as I fumbled through Tom’s cassette case. Charisse scowled at me in the rearview mirror with the “act your age” look.

“Delaware Destroyers, dummy,” said Eric.

“OK Delaware. Yah, George Thorogood and the Delaware Destroyers, yah, yah, yah. Tom said it was his favorite band,” I whooped a few more times for emphasis to further annoy my sister.

“When?” David asked leaning towards her.

“The last time I talked to him.”

They had all heard it before but they wanted to hear it again. I had been the last one to talk to him, so I told it again as if we could finally discover some logic for what happened in the replay of details and unanswered questions.

He said he was having dinner with a friend. He wasn’t alone for Thanksgiving. He had just gotten discharged from the army. He said he was happy and talked about music and his car. He said he might come to visit with his friend. He talked to little Clarence and asked him what he wanted for Christmas. Clarence told him a Star Wars At-At.

“Was there anything else? Could you tell something was wrong? Do you think he knew? Was the friend he was with the same one who did it? Why did he do it? How could anyone do something like that to Tom, to anyone? Do you think he had a fight with this guy? How could anyone get one up on Tom? Why? Why? Why?” They asked.

“Some friend,” David said slipping in a new cassette and cracking the knuckles on his thick hands. “The guy is gonna be dead.” Thorogood’s gravelly vocals raked though the air.

“From the day I was born, I was bad to the bone/Yeah, b-b-b-b-b-bad, bad to the bone-bad to the bone.”

6. Ten Seconds of Fame

Ex-GI Found Murdered In His Home

Saturday, December 5, 1981-Twenty-two-year-old Thomas Bryant Mongar was found shot dead in an upstairs hallway of his Manhattan, Kansas home. The grisly discovery was made approximately three days after the murder by Mongar's live-in girlfriend, Lisa Bennett. Bennett claims to have been away visiting relatives at the time of the murder. Although an autopsy has not been completed, a spokesman for the Sheriff's Department says it appears Mongar died instantly of two gunshots to the back of the head. Police say robbery appears to have been the motive. Witnesses also claim that Mongar had been involved in the trafficking of Marijuana. A police spokesman reports that they were unaware of Mongar's alleged activities and he was not being investigated at the time of his death. Police have no suspects at this time but are seeking twenty-two year old Gerald Smith for questioning. Smith was last seen with Mongar the day of the murder working out at Gold's Gym and later as they dined at Reed's Steakhouse. Both Smith and Mongar are natives of Jacksonville, Florida and were privates in the US Army. Both were recently discharged. Mongar is survived by his parents, Tom and Olivia, two brothers, David and Eric, two sisters, Sonja and Charisse, a niece, Hillary, and a nephew, Clarence.

7. Pimp Car

Charisse changed lanes so she could turn into the Shell station for gas. It was right across the street from the funeral home. I noticed there were a couple of cars parked in the funeral home parking lot I didn't recognize. *Tom's friends?* David got out, scanning the parking lot before he turned to start pumping. We'd all been doing that, looking over our shoulders, locking doors. The night before, a stranger had walked towards me in the parking lot. "Get lost," I had screamed at him, my keys poised to jab and rip. He had turned and left quickly, looking more scared than I was.

The sound of the gas rushing through the pump and into the tank underscored the oppressive silence in the car. Dabbing my nose on my sleeve, I pressed my sore eyelids. The pressure was building again despite the fact I was sure I didn't have one drop of fluid left in my body. I leaned forward to talk to Charisse, words rolling awkwardly over my numbed tongue. "You think Tom was listening to those songs the day he died?"

Charisse shot me a hard glance. "Can't you just stop? You're so over dramatic. You're just crying for yourself. You're pathetic," she said tossing her head, causing her long, blonde hair to swing to the other shoulder.

"Oh, here we go again," I said, leaning back in the seat. Just like when we had first arrived from Seattle together for the funeral. Lying on the hide-a-bed in the spare room, we drank cheap vodka, talking and crying most of the night. Charisse tried to remember something good about Tom, but all she could remember was that she picked on him all the time.

"You were just kids, Charisse. He was just a kid." I told her. It seemed like a moment to comfort each other but she pushed me away instead.

"You're so weak. I've always had to take care of you," she said, angrily recounting every trespass she could think of since I hit puberty. That was the year I had actually ripped gashes in her forearm with my fingernails in the heat of some argument. I had forgotten about it

as soon as my own bruises had faded. But Charisse had nursed the wounds that eventually turned into three long thin scars she flaunted whenever she wanted to make a point.

“And you got pregnant and had to get married to that jerk when we were supposed to move out together. He still cheating on you?”

She always knew how to dig deep and then twist the blade but I just couldn’t understand her anger at me now. She had been my best friend, my confidante. Everybody thought we were twins. Even I had a hard time separating where I ended and she began. So much so that when her leg was broken when she was a baby, I even had a vivid memory of walking down the hospital hallway in a cast. For years, I thought it was my leg that was broken.

Understandably, we had our own lives now. At twenty-eight, I was a settled-in mom—not the life I had dreamed of, but I was coping. Charisse was a shrewd, hardworking businesswoman, selling her grooming business and purchasing a successful bicycle shop in Seattle that she shared with her husband. I envied her ability to make money and her childless freedom. But somehow, Tom’s death brought forgotten history to the surface, as if the facade of the “good family” had begun to crumble.

“Wheel in the sky keeps on turnin.’ Don’t know where I’ll be tomorrow,” Eric’s acapello soared off key, jerking me from my reverie. I joined in, both of us singing at the top of our lungs until snot bubbled from my nostrils from the crying. I dug in my purse for Kleenexes only finding more wads of wet paper. *He died for nothing, for no reason, no matter what people said. He was just a kid. He was a good kid, generous and kind-hearted. He gave his toys away to friends and even saved bugs from drowning in the swimming pool. He made some mistakes. Everybody makes mistakes. He didn’t deserve this.* I peered out of the tiny window at the boulevard.

Nothing looked the same. Nothing’s ever going to be the same

8. Quiz

1. What would a friend do if another friend had \$10,000 in cash?
 - a) Advise him to invest it.
 - b) Borrow some.
 - c) Murder him and take it.
2. What would someone say to his estranged girlfriend after blowing a friend's brains across the wall?
 - a) What have I done?
 - b) Call the police.
 - c) Baby, git your dancin' shoes on cause I'm coming home.
3. What punishment would a friend suffer for snuffing out a friend's life for money?
 - a) the electric chair
 - b) life imprisonment
 - c) ten years

9. Pimp Car

Traffic was thick. “You’re going to have to make a right out of the gas station and come back around,” David said.

“You think these are Tom’s glasses?” Eric suddenly piped up from his corner. I turned, horrified to see him with a pair of wire rim glasses cocked on his nose.

“How do I look? Do I look like Tom? Wow man, I’m seeing the world through Tom’s glasses. Groooooooooovy,” he said mimicking a stoned druggie.

“Where the hell did you get those?” I asked.

“I found them under the seat, ducky. Coll me Peetah. No, coll me Tom,” he said back in his Frampton persona, grinning stupidly.

“Look, I’m getting sick of this. Put those fuckin’ glasses away and quit talking like that,” I said, feeling something cold run up and down my spine.

“It should have been me,” he started to bawl. “I should have died. He didn’t deserve it. It should have been me.” Racking sobs cut off his words as I grabbed the glasses off his nose.

“Stop it, Eric, Stop it right now,” I said, finding myself shaking uncontrollably.

“Oh Jesus, fuckin’ shut up, will you Eric?” David said in a husky voice as he hunched against the door. Charisse’s face in the rearview mirror had turned to chalk at the apparition of Eric in Tom’s glasses.

I looked at the glasses in my hand. The lenses were smudged and the frames bent. Was he wearing these the day he died? I held them up to my eyes imagining they were a window into the past and could answer all my questions. What did the eyes behind these lenses see? What were those last moments like?

Did he know? He had called me the night before to wish me a Happy Thanksgiving. Someone was with him. Was it him? Did Tom suffer? Did he beg for his life, pray, take it for a joke until he felt the cold steel on the back of his neck? Did he cry, ask for his Mom, a last

wish? Did his life flash instantly dark or did he live long enough to feel a blinding and disjointed experience of his head losing pieces and his blood flowing out of like a warm flood from a broken dam?

An awful picture sharpened in the numbness of my brain. Head down, trembling on his knees-snap-snap-two hot, fiery points drilling into the bone at the back of his skull-a wild Fourth of July explosion behind his eyes—his nose, half his skull, right brain, and face blown off onto the hallway wall—arms flailing—body jerking—a warm, cherry pool of blood—sprawled in a heap at the top of the stairs like a pile of dirty clothes. Left to rot—like worthless road kill—not to be found for three days. Three days. Nobody even missed him.

10. Artifact

A professionally framed photograph of Tom arrived in my mailbox from my father as a birthday gift. Ever since my parent's divorce our relationship had been strained, but my father had been trying to patch the family back together by giving gifts of framed photographs with little stories handwritten on the back. For some reason, he had sent me a photograph of Tom taken while he was in the army. Tom had been dead thirteen years.

In the photograph, Tom's head was tilted, winking at the camera, his mouth a half smile as if he was about to give the punch line to a joke he had just told. He had my mother's petulant nose, which on him, had always made it seem as if he were up to something. The eye that was open was a hard blue. He was pointing to the shoulder of his tan, army-issue uniform. There were some stripes and insignias on the shoulder. I had known he was a private in the army, but didn't recognize these.

On the back was my father's scratchy writing.

Dear Sonja,

I ran across this old photograph of Tom. It symbolizes more than any other photo, his personality. If you notice, he is pointing to either his sergeant's stripes or an airborne pin. The problem is that he never made sergeant, nor was he in the airborne. This was either his way of realizing something he wanted or it was meant to convince us that everything was ok. He got away with outrageous impersonations when he was pushing drugs—posing one time as an airborne captain (uniform, decorations and all) with several thousand dollars in pot in his duffel bag. He was a great actor. He wanted to be a stunt man and was athletic enough to have succeeded. I miss him and I know you miss him too.

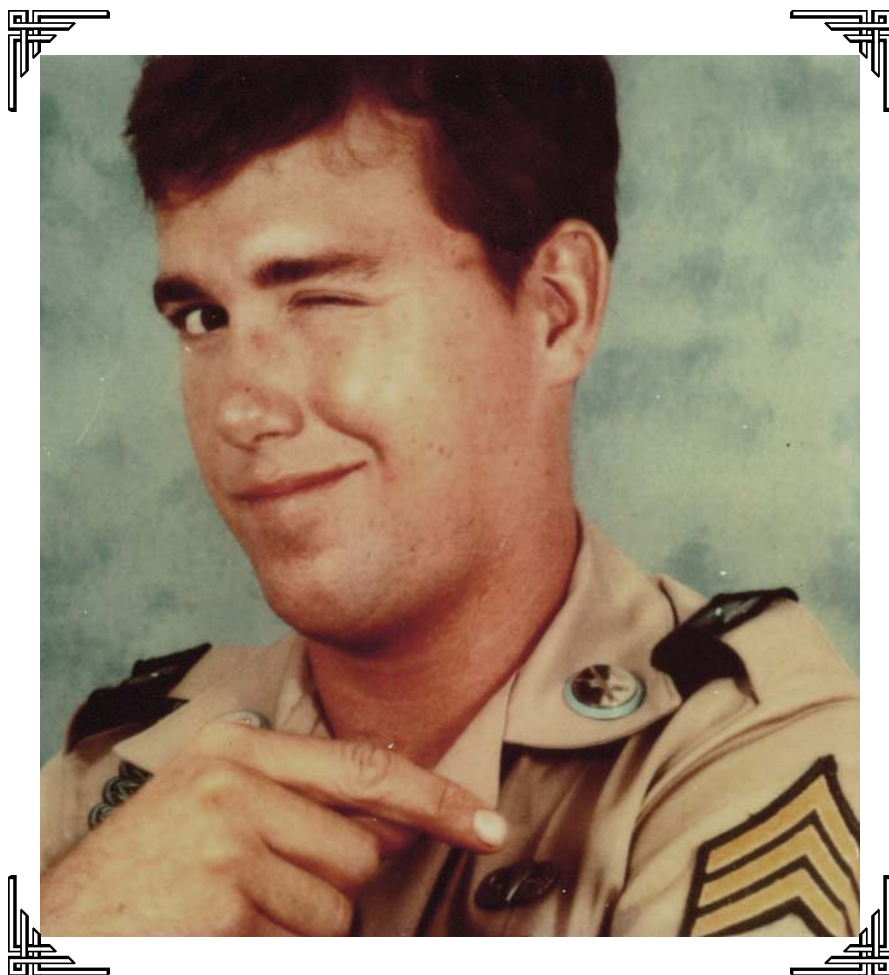
Love Dad

11. Pimp Car

The Ford seemed to prowl now, the way it was made to do, low over the asphalt of dimly lit old-city streets, low over its whitewalls, down the boulevard, down the long blocks of urban decay, a cobalt blue bullet punctuated by the glint of chrome fenders and the class of a white vinyl top.

Guzzling the last of the tequila, I shivered, trying to imagine how Tom's body was going to look. The coroner in Kansas had had the body a week. There had been an autopsy. His internal organs had been removed and studied. My stomach lurched as the car came to a stop in the dimly lit funeral parking lot.

"We got to go in there sometime. They're going to close," Charisse said.



Thomas Bryant Mongar
March 3, 1959 – December 1, 1981



Jacksonville

1990

CHAPTER 25

Thanksgiving Conversation

“What beautiful roses” she said as she pushed her nose into the twenty long stem roses sitting on the kitchen table. “Humpf ,”she added wrinkling it. “Hot house roses. You’d think after twenty years he’d try a little harder to get the real thing.”

“Why, what’s wrong ?” I asked.

“You mean you didn’t notice they don’t have a scent,” she said with a tinge of sarcasm in her voice.

“No.” I pushed my nose into the bouquet to smell for myself. She was right, nothing. I shrugged. I was no expert on roses. David didn’t practice romantic rituals like wearing his wedding ring or buying me roses.

“Where are you going for your anniversary?”

“Nowhere. He’s going out of town, golfing for three days.”

“My, my. The romance is gone, huh? Sounds like it’s time for separate bedrooms.” She laughed lightly. She and my father hadn’t slept in the same room for years.

“Mom, please.”

“Oh, don’t be so upset. You father and I are perfectly happy like that. We each have our own end of the house.”

I rolled my eyes and bit my lip. Where was this going? Thankfully, her focus turned elsewhere, my evolving kitchen. She’d been helping me decorate.

My kitchen was attempting to be her kitchen. I couldn’t remember if that had been her idea or mine. I knew I had always dreamed of the day I would have a kitchen of my own, but somehow the realization of that dream was falling short.

Maybe it was because her kitchen had had forty years of marriage to percolate and bloom. I had just purchased this Florida blockhouse with its tiny kitchen the year before. David and I had been like gypsies when he had worked for the railroad in Washington State, moving from town to town. We moved back to Florida after the Milwaukee Road had gone bankrupt. After nearly ten years back in Jacksonville, we had finally saved enough for a house. This was the first kitchen I'd ever owned.

Then there was the space difference to consider. Her farm-sized kitchen was wallpapered in two complementary fine autumn floras. An oak chair rail divided the patterns. A long, dark, maple parson's table, purchased from an exclusive furniture maker in North Carolina dominated the center of the kitchen. My father's chair had a wicker seat and armrests and sat at the head of the table. My mother's chair, sans armrests, sat at the other end. There was a long low-backed parson's bench with armrests that used to fit my three squirming little brothers side by side. But now, even my kids were too big for it. A lovely brushed gold grape leaf design repeats itself across the table corners, the chair backs and the seats of two three-legged milking stools, which complete the coterie. Her walls were covered with bric-a-brac, needlepoint pictures, shelves with milk pitchers and colorful dishes. We used to all eat there for the holidays. But things had unraveled after Tom's death, and we had all gone our separate ways.

My mother had noticed my kitchen's resistance to a woman's hand. She thought only a man could have designed it because the task of cooking was constantly interrupted by people walking behind the cook to go to the backyard, to the pool, to use the sink, or get into the refrigerator. Plus, there was no counter space to roll dough or spread ingredients for homemade cooking. I don't even like to cook, but I thought I might with the right kitchen.

My kitchen was small, but with room enough for the hand-me-down faux round oak table with four chairs, which suited me fine because my kids had stopped showing up for dinner anyway. My son, Clarence, was engaged to be married and had a baby on the way. My husband

worked nights while my daughter, Hillary, was with her friends most of the time. But I had to admit, the wallpaper was helping and the wooden shelf for the country plates. I liked drinking tea there in the mornings before work.

Still, there was a chill in the room as we perched at the kitchen table. The roses and wallpaper forgotten, the routine of “how is so and so” and “did you hear about such and such” wore on predictably.

“What about Thanksgiving?” My mother chirped hopefully. “Are you going to Paul’s?”

Visions of the day spent at my in-laws watching football and enduring racist and sexist humor wrenched in my gut. “I don’t know,” I said blankly trying not to betray my negative feelings.

“Well, I’m not getting Publix this year. They don’t have mashed potatoes.” Her tone was complaining. “We have to have mashed potatoes. Everyone loves mashed potatoes. Plus, they give you too much stuffing,” she continued, “and string beans. They’re canned - no cranberry sauce, no olives, no sweet potatoes, no pickles, no mashed potatoes and it cost \$54.00. Can you imagine? Maybe it’s not too late to get a turkey from the butcher and some of those delicious roll from Waldz...” By now she was talking to herself.

Returning to the conversation, she concluded her monologue. “Of course, it’s cooked.”

“Yes, it is mother. And it’s so nice to not have to cook it yourself,” I answered in my convincing mode now. Memories of Thanksgivings past rushed over me. Relatives milling, babies underfoot, days of cooking, chaos, and finally stacks of dirty dishes and short tempers.

“Why don’t you just get a smoked turkey from Sam’s, make some mashed potatoes and a couple of pies. That’ll be easy,” I said making the transition to my care-taking mode.

“Dad doesn’t like smoked turkey,” she countered.

“Well, get him his own damn dinner from Publix then.”

“We have to get what Dad likes, you know. He’s the one who cuts the turkey.”

And brings home the bacon, I thought angrily. “Well if he’s hungry he’ll eat anything won’t he?” I answered disgusted by my mother’s childlike dependence on my father.

She blinked at me a few times. A wave of guilt passed over me. I paused and looked at her intensely, trying to get past the grandmotherly woman sitting across from me. She had turned many heads in her day. Her skin was still creamy and smooth. Her baby fine brown hair turning slightly gray was coiled into a tight French roll. It exposed the strong lines of her jaw, a recollection of her Norwegian ancestry, lines which were now beginning to disappear into her neck. Obscured behind the thick lenses of her glasses were eyes that had once been a deep, lucid Scandinavian blue. Now, they were a hard blue—a hardness that came from a life of bitter disappointments. I knew them all.

“Mom, are you happy?”

Her lips snapped closed and she blinked hard.

“What?” She sputtered. “Happy, what do you mean happy?”

I suddenly felt the need to have a real conversation with my mother. I wanted to tell her that I really didn’t want my kitchen to look like hers anymore. I wanted to tell her that there isn’t a “right” kitchen in the world that can capture a family and make them stay home or never grow up. My kids were growing up and leaving me and I was spending a lot of time drinking tea in my kitchen, by myself.

“Is this it, Mom? In a marriage I mean. Is this all there is?”

She was quiet for a long time looking directly into my eyes. I looked back, probing for an honest glimmer. Her face softened.

“It’s not so bad, is it sweetheart?” She asked laying her palm over my hand and squeezing it.

There was pressure in my chest. I braced myself for the deluge of unanswered questions about to burst onto my kitchen table. The biggest one of all, how did my life get like hers?

“Don’t worry, it’ll pass. I felt like this too. Look you have everything, a house, a husband, a twenty year marriage. You raised two great kids. You’re soon to be a grandmother. You’re taken care of for life. Most women would die for that.”

I am dying; I wanted to tell her.

She released the grip on my hand and patted it. “Get yourself a hobby or a hysterectomy. It’s just the empty nest thing. It’ll pass. Believe me.” She stood up to leave, but not before walking over to the sagging wallpaper to look at it again. “You’re coming unglued here. I’ll stop by tomorrow and fix this.”



Orlando

2001

CHAPTER 26

No More Short Women In This Family

Hillary and I have come to buy food. When she was a little girl, I pushed the basket and she rode on the front, Shirley Temple locks bouncing, little fists grabbing for items on the shelf. I didn't let her eat junk food. I didn't even let her trick-or-treat until she was seven or eight. Her first time, she got a Pixie Stix in her bag. In her excitement, she ate the whole thing, paper and all. She always tried to sneak anything she could get her hands on into the cart when I wasn't looking.

No more Shirley Temple pouts and curls in all directions. She's 23 now, and taller than me, almost 5'6." Thank God, the five-three-and-under curse on the women in the family has ended. She has her dad's dark eyes. Her hair is a heavy chestnut mane that hangs halfway down her back that she tosses coyly like young women do.

She pulls the cart from the line like an expert, and helps my son's two boys, Dakota, 8, and Connor, 4, into it. I marvel at her calm and am content to watch.

"Hold this," she says handing me a heavy leather purse with a fancy metal logo on the flap. She's told me several times what it stands for, but I can never remember. I couldn't imagine spending forty dollars on a purse. I prefer the adventure and economy of thrift shops. I found mine at a garage sale. Perfectly good leather with swingy fringes, two dollars.

As she bends to situate the boys, her low-cut shirt shows off her cleavage. Didn't get those from me. But I did manage to breastfeed her. She got so fat she looked like a baby Sumo wrestler in her first K-Mart photo layout. Thank goodness she changed. She's still got the creamy breastfed baby skin and at least I can see her neck now. She really turned into a beautiful woman, I think.

Frigid air ushers us from the Florida swelter into the gleam of Publix's clean, shiny floors. Hillary pushes the cart and I hold on to the side. Inside the cart, the darling brown-eyed, perpetual motion machines work in tandem, whining for cereal, Gatorade and Kit Kats as we whisk by the displays.

Hillary heads for the fruit aisle. I would have started in meats. But that's what happens when your kids grow up. You lose your power in pieces. It starts when they're fifteen or sixteen and pretty soon they're pushing the grocery cart, taking you where they want to go. And you're hanging on.

As soon as the cart slows, the grandson with the Christopher Robin cheeks makes a dive for the apples. My arms fly out instantly saving him from a cracked skull on the Publix floor. I run defense for the other one when he escapes temporarily to fool around with the fruit scales. Dakota's pale, wiry and quick. He has my pointed ears and writes stories.

"I'm going to give y'all a case of red butt," his Aunt Hillary warns. There's a slight roll to her words.

"Come here, come to Grandma," I say as Dakota runs to me, folds his thin, lanky body in like a baby and lays his head on my shoulder. I squeeze him. He feels good in my arms.

"Maw-awm," she says. "They need discipline now, don't do that." Aunt Hillary measures out discipline, fair and swift. They mind her because they know she means it. Where did she learn that, I wonder?

"He was just weighing fruit. It's good for him to investigate," I tell her.

Hillary sounds like her dad when she talks about "red butt" and demands "yes ma'am" from the boys. I briefly think of the tall, skinny homegrown Southern boy that I'd married almost thirty years earlier. I'll never forget the day I first saw him, cowboy boots, long hair and a goatee, hanging out in the Dunkin' Donuts parking lot. Both of us were high and craving something sweet. Then. Got pregnant. Dropped out of college. Got married. I was eighteen.

I'm not married to him anymore.

"Mom, I'll tell you something funny. You know Dad wanted to cook for me the other night and asked me what I wanted," Hillary says, bending for a loaf of white bread.

"Yeah," I say holding my tongue on the benefits of whole wheat.

"I told him the yellow squash recipe. You know the one you used to bake with the tomatoes and cheddar cheese? Grandma's old recipe." She chuckles. "You should have seen the look on his face and he just starts grumbling. 'That was yer Mom's recipe,' as if I hurt his feelings or something. Then he told me about how you always set off the smoke alarm every time you cooked. He tells that to everybody." She laughs again.

"So what else do we need?" I ask gritting my teeth. That's a bold-faced lie. I made bread from scratch for God's sake. Happy thoughts. Happy thoughts. That's not my life anymore anyway. I'm a writer. And I teach at the university. And I'll soon have my masters. And I'm in great danger of being mistaken for an old lady. I want to throw up.

"Let's see. Clarence wants roast beef, red potatoes, the works and Hillary wants yellow squash," I say, pulling a list out of my purse and trying to get a grasp on a more motherly persona. I promised I would cook my kids an old fashioned family feast. A celebration. I hadn't seen them since I moved to Puerto Rico with my boyfriend six months earlier. I'm in Florida for another reason too. In twenty-four hours, I defend my thesis. There's that feeling again. A tightening between my solar plexus and my frontal lobe. The lights are a little too bright. My head throbs dully. Queasiness rises into my throat.

"How about onion soup mix on the red potatoes instead of lemon butter?" Hillary interrupts, rolling her eyes and rubbing her stomach. "Brandon's mother makes this awesome red potatoes with onion soup mix." She grabs the bag of Lipton Soup mix and quickly drops it into the cart.

"Onion soup?" I say doubtfully, thinking of all the preservatives and the dried onions.

“But that’s not how I make it. You and Clarence always loved the lemon butter,” I say sounding a little whiny and trying to hide my pout. Brandon’s mother this, Brandon’s mother that, Brandon’s mother everything. They have lunch together and play tennis together and share recipes. Brandon is Hillary’s fiancé and Mrs. Burrell is a goddamn saint.

“Yeah!” she says. “She is such a great cook and she showed me how. It’s so delicious. Don’t worry, I’ll make that and the salad.”

“Ok. Great idea,” I say quickly and flatly. She doesn’t seem to notice. There’s that tension again a notch tighter. The fluorescents seem to be blaring now, flashing off the passing carts.

“Pokemon Fruit Rollups, Pokemon Fruit Rollups, Pokemon Fruit Rollups,” the boys whine in stereo.

“You alright mom? I’m so excited about tomorrow. Are you worried?” She asks.

“Yes,” I say.

“No,” I lie trying to imagine myself sitting at a table with my thesis committee and talking about my writing. Or maybe I’ll be standing in the middle of the room, all their eyes looking at me, my mouth getting dry, and everything flying out of my head. I think of my stack of index cards and my list of fifty something books. What was it Woolf said that the intense moments of the past “have an existence independent of our own minds?” That’s why we relive them over and over. Yes. Memoir is the “joining of fragments” where the “past self must inform the present.” bell hooks. Yes. Ok. What about Montaigne?—just skimmed him, and Blake?—the essayist, a Romantic. Hmm, they probably won’t ask about him. And Hampl—memoir must show and tell and Zinsser—truth? What is the truth? It’s shaped by what you leave in and what you leave out. Oh God, I’m going to forget everything.

It’s my mother. She tried to go to college. But she flunked almost every test she ever took. She even flunked her driving test. The driving instructor had even asked her if she had a

language barrier. It wasn't her fault, hiding in the outhouse, or under the bed when she was a kid, just to get away with reading a book. And my grandmother, slapping her silly when she caught her. My grandmother even told me once that girls shouldn't go to school. My mother must've believed it. Pregnant with me at sixteen, she dropped out of high school to get married. I wanted to break this stranglehold of the past on the women in this family. Hillary already had. Why couldn't I?

"Mawm!" Hillary says again interrupting a potential spiral into a very dark abyss. "You alright?"

"Yeah, just a headache. It's too bright in here."

"What else do we need?" She asks enthusiastically.

"Cheese," I say as we head for the dairy aisle. Once there, I grab the mild cheddar.

"Get sharp," she says.

"The recipe calls for mild," I say. My chest is compressing. Connor is babbling in baby talk and trying to get out of the cart.

"But I like sharp," she insists, as she deftly whacks his butt before he can hit the ground. He crosses his arms and sticks out his lower lip. But he stays sat.

"But the recipe calls for mild." Now I am holding two packages in my hands. I can't breathe. The fluorescents seem to be strobing. Carts flash by.

"Fine. Get whatever you want," she says, her face snapping shut and her smile disappearing.

"But wait. But listen. But Hillary..." I sputter still standing there holding the two packages of Kraft cheese. The landscape shifts to Dali-esque. I think of Dante's seven rings of hell. Or was it nine?

The first ring of hell—the hell of innocents—limbo—A young woman, seemingly endless days of dishes, laundry, whining children.

There's a stack of Hunt's tomato soup at the end of Aisle Six. My kids' favorite lunch.

Second ring of hell—Hell of the lustful — One day, the woman packs up her Toyota, leaves her fifteen-year-old daughter, the house with the swimming pool, the husband of twenty years and the son with a baby on the way, for the lure of school, travel, writing, and men.

Yes—tomato soup, toasted cheese sandwiches with whole wheat and unfiltered, 100% Mott's apple juice.

Third ring of hell—Hell of the Gluttonous—the woman is tired of wandering. Whimsy and indulgence must become concrete—defend her thesis—her life story? Justify her choices to the disbelievers? To herself. A woman of letters? What if she fails? A failed life? No way back to the kitchen now. Six more hells to go.

I always cut off the crusts. They hated the crusts.

Suddenly I can see myself spinning madly into the Campbell's soup display or running screaming head on into the Wonder Bread. Dakota and Connor would clap. Hillary would cook dinner. I'd miss my thesis defense. I would end up instead where my father always predicted. "They're coming to take me away, aha, ehee, oho, to the funny farm where life is happy and gay aha, ehee, oho," I sing under my breath.

Gently Hillary takes the mild and the sharp from my hands and places them in the cart. She unhooks the silver logo of her purse and pulls out a small green box. "Hey Mom, have you tried one of these? Open your mouth."

I am ready to do anything including count flowers on yellow wallpaper. I open my mouth dutifully. She places a green sliver on my tongue. I press it to the roof of my mouth. A rush of Listerine roars through my nose. I immediately start sneezing.

When the sneezes subside, my head feels totally clear. The glare of the floor turns warm satin. The dairy aisle falls into focus. Sharp really seems fine with me.

Chuckling, she leads my hand to the cart and takes the helm. We move as one to the checkout counter. She does this well, I note.

“You’re just stressed out about your thesis,” she says. “Mom, its ok. You feel a lot of pressure. You’re the first woman in your family to get a degree.”

“Yeah, “ I say breathing deeply, the spring coming back into the step of my black cowboy boots.

“You’ll do fine,” she says. “I’m so proud of you.” Her steady brown eyes meet my blue ones. She seems so different from me it makes me wonder what genetic material she even got from me. “Hey, do you think they might have switched you with my real daughter at the hospital when you were born?”

“Mawm,” she chuckled and shook her head.

“Go ahead and get in line, I’ll be right back,” I say to her. I run quickly down Aisle Three and then cut over to One.

“What’d you get?” She asks me when I return.

“Those Listerine things and some Pokeymon Fruit Roll-ups.”

“Yay, Grandma!” Say the brown-eyed boys from the grocery cart.

As we leave, I watch my daughter manage the boys out of the store and load the car with the groceries. Nice car—a Volkswagen Jetta. In college too. She’s got credit cards, a 401K and her life mapped out for the next twenty years. She’ll make a great mom when she’s ready. I can do this. We can do this.

“I can look back and see sharp shadows, highlights and smudgy in-betweens. I have been in sorrows kitchen and licked out all the pots. Then I have stood on the peaky mountains wrapped in rainbows with a harp and a sword in my hands.”

My Story Ends With Freedom, Zora Neale Hurston

VITA

Sonja Mongar was born in Missoula, Montana. She earned her Bachelors degree with a concentration in print journalism and black and white photography from the University of North Florida in 1994. She completed her Masters degree with a concentration in Creative Non-fiction in 2001 and her Master in Fine Arts with a concentration in the same genre in 2004. She is a freelance journalist and editor and currently lives in San German, Puerto Rico where she teaches English Composition and Creative Writing at the University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez.